

Tears of the Demon

by Blue Lone Wolf 2574

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Summary: Saito and Sannan are sent to Edo, hoping to find Koudou Yukimura only to find his only daughter, the mysteriously capable Chizuru instead. Things only get more confusing when she returns to Kyoto with them, only to stir up more trouble! All the while, Saito can't help but feel oddly attracted to the young teenager. Future SaitoxChizuru pairing. Rated M for future content.

1. Chapter 1: A Rainy Night

Hey there! Blue here! Yet another fan of the awesome anime '_Hakuouki: Shinsengumi Kitan_' has appeared! And I really hope I meet everybody's expectations. It's a slight AU so don't get too upset if it's too different. Just a forewarning, I went a little OOC with Chizuru's personality so please forgive me! Anyway, I don't own '_HSK_' in any shape or form but dammit to hell SAITO IS MINE! Enjoy!

"Iii" = speech

Iii = thought

Chapter 1: Rainy Night

Hajime Saito struggled to walk through the rain filled streets of Edo, a free hand clutching at the wound in his left side, the blood mixing with rain and the black cloth of his kimono. His purple-black hair, long and flowing and tied by a white cord, was limp under the weight of the heaven's tears. Eyes of purple could only gaze hazily ahead of him, his bangs doing their best to avert the rain from his eyes. There were moments in this dimmed state of consciousness that he wished he could use his white scarf to either deal with the wound or protect his face from the cold wind. Though when he reached for it, he soon realized it was too soggy and wet to be used as anything but a weight on his tired shoulders. At some point in his unstable journey Saito had taken his katana from his belt and was using it to

walk. Otherwise he was sure he'd have fallen over long before now. But his task was too important to let up so easily, and he couldn't afford to bleed to death in the street like a dog. His pride as a warrior and loyalty as a member of the Shinsengumi demanded such.

At least now he understood why Kondou-san had sent him and not Heisuke or Sanosuke to deliver the letter. Hell even Shinpachi or Okita would've sufficed. But after all the fighting he'd just survived, Saito was sure that none of the others would've been able to get through like he had. His opponents had been great in number, but at least a few could compare to his level of skill and training. Hence why now he hobbled through the streets, his foggy mind focused on his destination more than anything before he could no longer stand from the loss of blood. If he was going to die that night, he may as well complete his last orders first. At some point, he wasn't sure where anymore, he'd lost track of Sannan-san. The bespectacled man had insisted on coming with him, and somewhere in the fighting they'd gotten separated. He'd already attempted to find his companion but found that he'd either gotten too far away to be seen or was looking for him also. Regardless, he had a job to do. All he had to do was ignore the pain long enough to get to his destination.

Keisuke Yamanami aka Sannan-san, felt terrible. He and Saito had gotten separated in the fighting with a group who he could only imagine to be bandits. Walking around the deserted streets of Edo, his straight brown hair sticking to his head in an uncomfortable way, all while the cold rain was making his usually dark green clothes look almost black. Only issue was some were too skilled to be bandits, and didn't seem to be ronin. And any others he could likely question had run away. But not before they'd managed to cut his arm and left him alone, bleeding and tired in the street. The cut wasn't deep and he'd managed to staunch the bleeding with a handkerchief he thankfully had on hand. His highly active mind was already going over the fight over and over again. Last he'd seen the man, Saito had been surrounded. And outnumbered but hopefully not outmatched in a way that'd never happened before in any battle they'd ever been in. As he did his best to walk the late night streets without drawing suspicion to himself, Sannan hoped his friend was able to walk away in one piece as he moved to the address etched into his mind. The rain was getting his glasses wet, making it hard for him to see the road in front of him, as if the darkness wasn't enough.

Pausing in a gate arch of a nearby property, Sannan felt relief in the light of dying lamp, the candle within giving him enough vision to see the nameplate on the wood pillar next to him. The name was wrong but he was sure he was close. He'd already asked someone on their way into the city where to find the house and had stated it was near a house bearing the same family name he was looking at. Just the thought of finishing his task made his heart race a little faster. If he could deliver the letter, he could get back to searching for Saito. He just hoped the man was alright since they'd gotten separated. He was about to leave his spot under the gateway when he saw a familiar figure slowly limp its way past a lamp on a corner far ahead of him. Going against his own passive nature, Sannan couldn't help but run towards the man, practically shouting at him through the rain.

"Saito-san!" he called over the rush of rainwater pouring down on them, somehow able to make out the other man in spite of the darkness of the night. In all his years, Sannan had never seen his companion

look so tired and pale. "Saito-san are you all right?"

"Sannan-san? Ah it is you." Saito's soft and almost monotone voice responded from under the now limp mass that was his hair, a single azure eye glimmering in pain despite his lack of proper expression. "Whereâ€|?" the man began to ask before his balance nearly failed him, drawing his friend's attention to the clear misuse of his katana and the way he held his side.

Bitting down a curse, Sannan was quick to help the other man stand up straight, nearly having to yell over the rain and the wind. "There's no time for questions now. You need a doctor and we're close to the house. Can you still walk?"

"Yes. At least for a while longer." Saito managed, his voice finally revealing the pain he was in. The bespectacled man could only imagine how much but knew not to dwell on it.

Instead he nodded, gently maneuvering the other man's right arm over his shoulders so he could wrap his own around his waist. "I understand. Here, grab onto me." He said as he did, using his free hand to pull out an extra handkerchief that was somehow still dry. "Alright now take this. It should be enough to staunch the wound at least for a little while."

Saito didn't respond this time, but took the cloth as instructed. Sannan couldn't help but feel worried over his companion. Who knew how much blood he'd lost since he'd last seen the man before now? If only they could get there faster, get there before-.

No! You mustn't think like that! He'll live! He'll live and you'll make sure of it. Sannan berated himself silently, his bespectacled eyes scanning the name plates as they walked through the soaking street. As they went, he could feel Saito getting slowly heavier and heavier, his breathing coming in more labored gasps. He was sure that the practically ice-cold rain wasn't helping any either. Sannan had to pause when they nearly walked past a gate, the lamp having gone out likely earlier in the night. Turning slightly to better see the writing, the man's brown eyes widened at the name: Yukimura. If not for the circumstances, Sannan was sure he'd be talking his head off in his excitement. But he knew better. If the person they sought was inside, then that would make things twice as good then they were right then. By now Saito was almost twice as heavy than before and that worried him.

"Hold on Hajime-kun, just hold on. You stay here while I get the door."

If the man was going to say anything in response, Sannan didn't wait for it. He had to get help or his companion wouldn't live to see the next day. Immediately he practically slammed the sliding shoji door open, revealing a dark hallway within. No lights were lit but the place was well dusted and dry. Satisfied with this, Sannan wasted no time in retrieving his companion, almost literally dragging him into the cool darkness of the home. Thankful to be free of the rain and the wind, Sannan set Saito down onto the wooden ledge before looking around for a candle to light up the dark space, his brown eyes darting for the objects he desired. Finding none but not about to let his panic distract him, Sannan wasted no time then calling into the abyss of black beyond his line of vision, his bespectacled eyes

searching for any sign of life.

"Is anyone here? Anyone in this house?! Please we need help!" he called into the dark, the cut on his arm twinging him at the edge of his senses but little else.

For a moment nothing happened, the quiet filled only by the unending downpour coming from outside. Then, somewhere in the dark, a dim speck of light swayed, hurried footsteps accompanying it as it approached. Soon enough, a young girl, likely barely sixteen came into his plain of view. Dressed in simple sleeping yukata with a robe hurriedly put on, her long brown hair down as she held a paper lantern up between them. Her brown eyes stared at him, containing a glimpse of fear, as she spoke the first thing that seemed to come to mind. "Who are you? Why are you here?"

"Young lady, can you help us? My friend is wounded and I fear for his life. Is your father at home?" Sannan managed to say over his temporary panic. If they didn't hurry, Saito would probably bleed out.

The girl blinked, the candlelight from her lamp pushing back the night's shadow to reveal the wounded man practically slumped on the floor. Her soft face took on a grim expression. "N-no, he isn't but I know medicine. Bring him this way. Quickly!"

Sannan nodded, quickly turning back to his wounded comrade, forcing him to stand once more as they both got over the steps on the smooth wooden floors of the dark home. The girl waited until they were both on solid ground before moving ahead of them, the lantern bobbing as she half walked, half ran ahead, guiding them to an empty bedroom where she hastily slid open a pair of rice paper doors that was likely used for stay in patients. Leaving the lantern on the floor, the girl moved away in purposeful steps to retrieve various things already within the space. As she worked, Sannan helped Saito lie down on the tatami mat and the soft pillow, both feeling fresh and clean. The rice paper doors still open, the young woman even vanished a time or two only to come back with boxes before settling next to the bed.

"In here! How long has he been this way?" she asked, as she sorted through the various supplies already gathered.

The authority in her voice, despite its softness, swept away any doubts Sannan had that this girl knew what she was doing. If anything, the way she was pulling out various items from the small boxes and cabinets was proof she was well-versed in the ways of medicine. "Roughly half an hour, give or take. We got separated when some men attacked us. It's likely that they overpowered him somehow. Otherwise I couldn't possibly fathom this to have happened at all."

Though her face was youthful and childish, the stern look she gave him most certainly wasn't. "A local gang of that I've no doubt. Usually they're nothing more than riffraff but this? This is too far even if they're drunk half the time."

"I see. The patrollers will no doubt have their time filled dealing with them after this." Taking a second to dry his glasses on the rare dry patch of his clothes, Sannan steeled himself for a long night as

he asked. "Do you require help?"

Brown hair now pulled back into a tail, her sleeves tied back to reveal pale arms, the young woman nodded, her voice hard and face grim. "Yes, there should be a jar or two of clean water in the kitchen, down the hall and to the left. I'll need that if I'm to clean away all this blood."

"I'll be back. To the left you say?" the Shinsengumi warrior asked as he got to his feet again, already heading for the door as instructed.

"Yes and hurry. I'll need your strength as well."

Sannan gave her an odd look but didn't comment, managing to navigate the darkness of the home and quickly returning with the large jar, pouring some of the water into a bowl she'd retrieved earlier at her command. It wasn't until a little later that he understood her words, forced to hold the usually stoic man down as he bit back screams of agony. Despite his weak struggles and sounds of pain, Sannan was surprised to find the girl didn't even flinch, her own face gaining a thin layer of sweat as she worked. Thought they'd given the man a mild sedative, that didn't stop him from reacting to each time the sharp needle pierced his skin as the girl silently and skillfully sewed the large gash shut with an impressive amount of concentration. In less than a few hours, the wound was closed and covered in an oddly green paste as the girl calmly covered it all up with bandages. Again with Sannan's help, they settled the man into the bed, covering him with a clean kimono and fresh sheets warmed by a pot of hot coals. It wasn't long that she discovered he too was injured, though thankfully his own procedure wasn't as long and arduous compared to Saito's. Once they finished, the spectacled man finally took a relaxed breath, turning to the girl with a kind smile. "Thanks very much, young madam. For a moment, I honestly thought my friend was at death's door."

"It's quite alright. I'm well accustomed to dealing with patients so getting a late night call isn't out of the ordinary." the girl said with a kind smile, the expression seeming to sweep away the grim concentration that'd dominated it not moments before. "Now that your friend is comfortable, I suppose it's time for introductions don't you think?"

Blinking his surprise, Sannan honestly didn't know what she was talking about for a few seconds. "Huh? Oh my! How rude of me!" he declared with a deep laugh. "I'm terribly sorry, in all the chaos it slipped my mind! I'm Keisuke Yamanami of the Shinsengumi. But most of my comrades call me Sannan. And you are?" he said, bowing to her as he spoke as was custom.

Still smiling her amusement, the girl bowed in turn. "Chizuru Yukimura, and I'm glad I could help." Looking at the sleeping warrior only a few feet away she asked. "And your friend?"

"Ah right, he's Hajime Saito and he's also from the Shinsengumi. He came with me as a precaution against what we clearly tried to avoid. Saito-san's a very skilled swordsman, but I guess even they were too much for him."

"Well, at any rate some rest should do him some good. I can change

the bandages tomorrow but for now you need to get out of those clothes. They're soaked and I don't think you have any intention of getting sick too."

"Ah, y-yes you're right. Do you-?" Sannan began to say.

Chizuru beat him to the punch, already getting to her feet and picking up the paper lantern as she did. "I have plenty of my father's clothes on hand. Judging by your size, they should fit you well. This way."

"Thank you." He said, smiling sincerely at her as he got up to follow.

This earned him another smile in return before she turned away to push the shoji door open. "Of course."

Following the young woman through the dark house, Sannan ended up in yet another bedroom, this one clearly meant for someone else even the bed obviously hadn't been slept in for a while. Leaving the paper lantern in the corner, Chizuru smiled kindly at him. "You should find something that'll fit you here but also be sure to pick what you need for your friend too. I'll be back momentarily to take them all to be cleaned in the morning. You're welcome to use the bed too so don't hesitate alright?"

"Thank you very much, you're very kind. Won't you need the light though?" he asked, already feeling self conscious for using another man's bedroom as his own.

Chizuru only shook her head, still smiling but almost knowingly. "No, it's fine. I'm well accustomed to walking about in the dark and I know this house well. All I need do now is get you some hot tea and warn the neighbor in case of trouble."

"Warn the neighbor? Is that really necessary?" the samurai asked, instantly concerned by this. Gripping his swords, he knew he was still in good enough shape to fight but Saito? He was defenseless even though they'd left his swords with him.

The girl's smile lost some of its humor, as if regretting the need for such a thing. "Sadly yes. If the same thugs who attacked you and your friend know where you went, they may try something before the patrols can stop them. Though I don't doubt your skill, by letting others know might give you the advantage."

So it's just a precaution. That should help if anything does happen. Sannan thought prior to nodding his approval, relaxing only slightly. "Ah, of course. I'll find something to wear now."

"Just give me a few minutes then Sannan-san. I'll only be down the hall if you need anything." Chizuru informed him as she stepped into the dark hall.

The rice paper door slid shut just before the sound of her soft retreat filled the silence before that too faded into nothing. When there was no sound of distress or annoyance, he could easily guess that she spoke the truth about knowing the house best even at night. Doing as instructed, the brunette easily found the clothes the girl spoke of, each one neatly folded and clean if a bit stale. As he

feared, the girl's father Koudou hadn't returned to his house in quite some time. He was sure that if he asked her, Chizuru wouldn't be able to tell him where the western taught doctor had gone. Holding back the tired sigh, Sannan shivered when he realized how cold he was, the cold air and rain water working together to freeze him. Finding what he felt was necessary for him to take, Sannan managed to strip and redress in a pair of white tabi and an equally white yukata that fit him well enough to actually be his. Once he was finished dressing, he searched his damn clothing for the letter, addressed to Koudou, though still dry was just as useless now that it was obvious the man wasn't at home. As per the girl's instructions, he found something Saito could wear when he got up. When he finished, he set his wet clothes into the neatest pile he could achieve as he set to folding back the covers to the bed. His thoughts were interrupted when he heard the girl's soft footsteps returning, her own tabi muffling her progress across the wooden floors. Coming to a stop just outside the door, her equally soft voice called from behind the thin barrier between them. "I'm coming in, are you ready?"

"I am." He said simply, watching as the door slid open, Chizuru following custom to sit on the floor before opening the door and having returned with a tray with two tea mugs on it.

Smiling kindly as she shut the door behind her, Chizuru put the tray down between them, handing him one of the steaming mugs before taking the other for herself. Only then did Sannan take the time to truly examine the girl, the bright lantern revealing her eyes were more hazel than brown. At some point she'd tied her hair back more carefully but still in a tail, her pink yukata doing little to hide her small frame but strong posture. Though she had no makeup on, the girl was still a natural beauty despite her age of possibly sixteen. If she gave any sign to his obvious ogling, the young woman didn't show it as she took a sip of her tea before speaking again. "I was able to speak to my neighbor and he promised to alert us should trouble arise. He's also instructed another of our neighbor's to run for the city patrol if need be. At any rate, I suppose you have something you need to tell me correct?"

This girl is clearly more observant than she lets on. And to think I thought she'd be meek and nervous about having two strangers in her house! Sannan found himself thinking, quick to keep his expression clear of awe at the girl's bold questioning. "Indeed I do. Would you happen to know where your father, Koudou Yukimura might be? We have a letter for him from our captain but we've yet to find him?"

For the first time, Chizuru looked confused. "Find him? You must be mistaken. My father left for Kyoto over a month ago and I haven't seen him since. He used to send letters but they've since stopped. I've thought of going to Kyoto myself to find him but your arrival makes it clear that trip would be in vain." She let out an aggravated sigh. "I'm sorry but I can't help you in this regard, but at least you're safe from those brutes wandering the streets even in this weather."

"I thank you, and I'll do what I can to keep you safe from them if they do come. They didn't injure me badly, as I'm sure you know, but hopefully they aren't so foolhardy as to attack those they've already defeated."

"And in the meantime, you and Saito-san are welcome to stay until he

gets better. Given how and where he was injured, I highly recommend against traveling. Such activity could only make him worse." She stated firmly, her voice suddenly stern, as if getting ready to give a younger child a firm scolding. In a way, Sannan couldn't help but feel he was the one about to be rebuked for something he hadn't done yet. After a moment the expression lightened. "and since I'm not about to deprive you of what little money you may have, my only request is that you assist with tasks around the house or in case of patients. I also suggest sending a messenger to your headquarters come morning explaining your predicament. I imagine from your friend's wound, you'll be here for quite some time."

"That's most thoughtful and I accept your requests. It would be dishonorable of me to allow a young lady like you to fall victim to thugs after a meaningless spite of revenge on our behalf. I will do what I can during our stay."

"Good. You can start by getting some sleep. Should you need anything else, I'll be in the bedroom around the corner. I'll also need to check your bandages come morning after breakfast after we deal with Saito-san's. And if we're both lucky, the rain will stop before long." Casually getting to her feet as she collected up the pottery, she gave him one last smile before heading for the door once more. "Good night Sannan-san."

"Good night Yukimura-san." The spectacled warrior said with a kind smile of his own as he watched her leave.

Taking the empty mugs and tray with her, but again leaving the paper lantern behind, Chizuru's steps faded into the depths of the house for the last time. As if the girl had predicted it, the sensation of warm tea in his stomach helped him fall asleep faster than he'd thought. Placing his glasses close by for later but not too close to accidentally step or roll onto them, Sannan blew out the candle in the lantern before settling into the bed. He was asleep almost as soon as he closed his eyes.

Once she was in her room, Chizuru didn't know whether to bless or curse her luck. Even though the men coming to her home, even at such a late hour wasn't inconvenient, it was still a dangerous blight to her original plan. Any chance of her going to Kyoto now anytime soon were dashed but she couldn't despair no matter what: they were from Kyoto and they were clearly looking for her father too! If her luck continued to hold, there was an unlikely but slim chance they may take her with them when they left. The fact that one of them was badly injured could be the very leverage she needed to ensure this to happen. Else she may have to pack what little she had and go herself, even with the family short sword as protection. She was still young and unassuming that she could pass as a boy and if not, she was smart enough to know how to fake it if need be. How else would she get around certain parts of Edo if not for the disguises she had to wear, mostly out of concern for the various men that wandered the large town. In a year or so it would be near impossible to hide her female figure but for now, she did what she had to. Letting out a quiet sigh to herself, Chizuru decided to leave such things for the morning as she got back into her bed. As much as she disliked how it had cooled in her absence, the teenager settled in anyway, knowing that she had much to do the next day. The cold and unrelenting weather permitting, things just might change for the better.

Finished! A bit shorter than my norm, but I couldn't think of what to put next and I'd hate to make the intro too long. Anyway, I honestly hope everyone enjoyed this since I understand everyone did their best coming up with a proper SaitoxChizuru pairing fic. Now back to business! Next:

Chapter 2: A Sunny Day

Sannan and Saito are both safe in Koudou Yukimura's house with his only daughter but already things are stirring to life that will change everything. In Kyoto, danger lurks and the frictions of changing politics revive old rivalries. See what happens in:

**Chapter 2: A Sunny Day!**

2. Chapter 2 : A Sunny Day

Hello everyone and welcome back to my latest fic on the anime HSK, '_Tears of the Demon_', a tale of war, strife and potential love. Sadly I don't own HSK but I'll grab Saito for myself every time! Enjoy!

"Iii" = speech

Iii = thought

Chapter 2: A Sunny Day

The sounds of birds in the trees outside woke him before the warmth of the sun did, or what little heat it could get past the still lingering rain clouds. Fatigue and pain kept his eyes shut but only for a moment as Hajime Saito blearily gazed at the ceiling tiles of an unfamiliar room that definitely wasn't his quarters back in Kyoto. Eyes of blue-purple stared at said tiles in mild confusion as the samurai wracked his brain on how he got to where he was and why. He got his answer when he tried to sit up, the cut on his left side feeling like the mashing jaws of an angry tiger were piercing his flesh. Lying limp and suddenly tired again on the soft bed, Saito opted to look around instead, his sharp gaze quickly finding his swords lying on the floor next to the futon but aside from a single window to his left and a set of doors to his right, it was empty. There were boxes and small chests of drawers pushed against the wall but little else. When the pain in his side finally died down to a bearable level, and his breathing returning to normal, Saito dared to lift his right arm so to pull back the covers. In his fatigue, all he did was push back a corner of the oddly heavy material, revealing to him that the sleeve covering his arm wasn't the color it should be. His kimono's sleeve was black. This one was white.

I remember walking through the street with Sannan-san, just before we were attacked. I know I was fighting those ronin for a while but one managed to wound me. What happened after that? And where is Sannan-san? Saito thought as he tried to recall everything about the night before, with little success. Before he could ponder on it more, the sound of soft footsteps coming closer across smooth wooden floors met his ears, making him turn towards the door. As if on cue, the footsteps came to stop just outside the pair of shoji to the room, one being pushed back to reveal a teenage girl possibly a year

younger than Heisuke. Light brown hair held back in a simple knot while her bangs helped frame her delicate face, hazel brown eyes widening a fraction when her gaze met his, all of it matched with a light pink kimono. Unable to speak, Saito suddenly felt like he'd seen her somewhere before but his hazy mind couldn't place her.

Quickly turning away, the girl suddenly called off into the depths of the unknown place, her soft voice strengthened by tone and volume. "Sannan-san! Saito-san's awake! Could you give me a hand please?"

"Yes, I'm coming!" he heard his traveling companion call back, his voice distant as if he was practically on the other side of the building. From somewhere far off, rushed footsteps filled the morning quiet, also getting closer as they shortened the distance. The girl was already in the room with a tray of bandages and medicine bottles when the bespectacled advisor all but rushed into view, his face a little flush with effort. Even from such a small distance and his practically blurred vision, he could see his companion was also wearing clothes that obviously weren't his own. Brown eyes filled with concern were quick to brighten when he saw what the girl said was true, the dark emotions giving way to relief.

"Saito-kun! Thanks goodness. You had us worried. How do you feel?" Sannan exclaimed as he came into the room, moving around the girl and the bed to be on Saito's left, placing a hand on the man's shoulder.

Licking his dry lips, Saito managed to get his voice to work, its chords straining to make sound through his silent agony. "Tiredâ€¦|painâ€¦|." Glancing at the girl, already breathing hard with effort Saito asked. "Whoâ€¦|?"

"This is Chizuru, Koudou-san's daughter. She helped us last night when we arrived. You don't remember?" Sannan asked, his eyes full of question.

Saito barely managed to shake his head, only to find it made him dizzy. "Notâ€¦|really."

From his right, already settled on the floor next to the bed, the girl nodded at his words, her expression grim as she spoke once more. "That's to be expected considering what you've been through. Proper introductions will have to wait while we check your wound so if you'd just bear with us for the moment." As he watched her speak, Saito determined the look didn't suit her, even if he barely remembered her. "Sannan-san, if you'd help him sit up a moment?"

"Yes, of course." The bespectacled man affirmed with a nod, already gripping his friend's shoulder firmly, his own face hard with concern. "Take it slow, Saito-kun."

Pulling the covers back, the pair helped the injured warrior turn onto his right side, Sannan's firm grip keeping him steady as Chizuru's smaller hands peeled away the bandages covering his wound. Delicate fingers poked the area gingerly, hazel eyes examining the stitching, skin and its color. Eventually she spoke again, still sounding serious. "Hmm, no fever and no signs of infection which means his body and the medicine are doing their jobs. That's good but

we should still check this regularly to be sure." The girl turned her attention down to Saito, light brown eyes meeting jewel blue. "On a scale of one to ten, what amount of pain are you in?"

Meeting her gaze in spite of his pain, he responded through gritted teeth. "Feels like at least seven."

Chizuru nodded approvingly, smiling at Sannan as though suddenly amused. "Honesty is a good trait. You neglected to mention that Sannan-san."

"You expected him to lie? Not Saito-san!" the advisor exclaimed, unsure if he should be insulted by the teenager's verbal jab.

A wry laugh filled the room. "Yet my father stubbed his toe, told me he was fine even though I saw him practically hopping away, cursing most shamefully. One way or another, men lie about their pain. Women too, but only if it's done by a loved one and those rarely end well." Her expression shifted again to that of critical determination. "All that needs to be done is apply the medicine and change the bandages. Ready?"

"Yes." Sannan replied, nodding once more as he shifted to put his arm around his friend's shoulders. With Sannan's help, Saito was able to sit up, the pain from the simple action almost making him pass out again. For close to two minutes, his senses were overwhelmed by sharp twinges of which he'd never felt before and hoped to feel never again. But he kept his mouth shut and his body still as eventually, the pain faded as delicate fingers applied what felt like a warm paste to his cold skin. Looking down, Chizuru was so focused on her task, she never noticed his gaze upon her as she worked. Despite the early hour the teenage girl was already working up a small sweat while diligently covering the large line from his breast to his hip with the medicine he honestly didn't wish to know what it contained. If anything, its application and her steady but gentle movements were close to hypnotic and soothing.

He was forced back into reality when the light tug of a bandage sparked another bout of pain Saito found he couldn't ignore, nor help but express as he winced. Looking up at him with a look of concern, the young woman tending to him asked. "I'm sorry, did that hurt you badly?"

"A little." Saito admitted, knowing that lying probably wouldn't do him any good. If this young woman was as perceptive as he thought, she'd likely see it coming and call him on it. Also because he knew lying would possibly delay his recovery.

Chizuru accepted his response with a nod, working a bit more carefully on getting him bandaged up before Sannan helped him right his clothes. Packing up what little mess and supplies left over, Chizuru smiled down at him as his friend helped him lie back down. "Now that that's over with, I have a small breakfast and tea ready for you in case you were hungry. Did you want it now?"

"I would like to try." He admitted. Despite his pain, he was a little hungry but whether his body would agree was hard to say.

"Good, I'll be right back." Chizuru took the medicine tray in hand as

she left, not bothering to close the door.

Saito waited until she was out of earshot before managing to ask his superior who was still holding him upright. "Sannan-san, what happened?"

A look of concern flashed across his superior's face, as if the question was disturbing in some way. "We got separated remember? I found you wounded and managed to bring you here. You've been asleep since then."

"I remember meeting you but little else. What of Koudou-san? What of the letter?" the purple haired man asked, searching the other man's eyes for answers.

Sannan couldn't help but look defeated, his response sad. "Koudou-san isn't here, making the letter useless. But I did send a messenger back to headquarters this morning, telling of your injury and our findings. Chizuru-san has recommended we stay here until you're fit to travel."

"Then get someone to carry me back."

His superior only shook his head, face suddenly stern. "I'm sorry but we can't. Not when moving you could make you worse. Normally I would agree but your wound is in a tricky spot. In the meantime you can rest and hopefully get better at a reasonable pace."

"This is your professional advice on the matter?"

"It is, as is Chizuru-san's. She may not be a licensed doctor but I respect her opinion. She's actually quite skilled for such a young lady."

Chizuru's voice cut in from the doorway, this time with a tray of food in hand as she entered. "I leave the room and already you're praising me? Keep that up and half the town will be at my door for a diagnosis."

"Just speaking the truth, as you prefer." Sannan informed her, smiling politely.

"I do, and now you can be helpful in getting our patient to eat his food before it gets too cold. Remember: small sips and bites. No more than you can handle, understand?"

Saito merely nodded, knowing the teenage woman was just trying to caution him against accidentally choking. Of all the things that'd happened so far, dying in such a silly way was not how he saw himself leaving the world. The task of eating took what felt like a half to nearly a full hour before he finally had to turn his head away, for what amount he'd already had was threatening to come up his throat in protest. At the very least, he'd gotten halfway through the soup and more than half of the tea, both of which were making him sleepy. Once again with Sannan and Chizuru's help, he settled back onto the bed to get some more rest, nodding in response to their promise to check on him later. As soon as they got up to leave, the shoji sliding shut behind them, Saito slipped back into the depths of slumber once again.

He ended up sleeping the day away, waking only to find himself alone again, this time the sun wasn't trying to enter the room at all. From the sound of it, it'd started raining again but more of a sprinkle than last night's downpour. Off in the distance, a rumble of thunder easily told him that the clouds were moving away from the town and probably wouldn't be completely gone for at least a few hours. His room was almost enveloped in weak shadows or it would be if not for the lit paper lantern in the corner sending the veils of night back. Shifting under the heavy covers, Saito tested his range of motion and was pleased to find that though he was still fairly weak he could still move everything save for his left arm without consequence. As usual, the Shinsengumi's advisor was right: moving him or moving on his own power wasn't the best idea given how badly wounded he was. Though the cut wasn't deep, it was large enough to bleed like mad, and hurt enough to knock the wind out of him. Still testing his limits, Saito discovered he could move his left arm so long as he didn't try to lift it higher than his shoulder because his side screamed in protest whenever he tried. Once again fighting down the pain he'd brought upon himself, Saito fought it some more to sit up, nearly falling back again when he felt the torn flesh of his side shrieked its protest. Eventually he was sitting up, gasping and in pain, but upright.

As if assaulted by a sudden chill the samurai shivered, realizing his body was protesting to the loss of the covers that'd trapped his body's heat, but he wasn't about to let it deter him from his goal. But before he could get any further, the sound of padded feet moving casually across the wooden floor outside his door though at a steady pace as if the person was carrying something. Sure enough, the footsteps got louder only to stop just at his door, the soft clack of wood on wood contact prior to the door sliding open. Like before, it was Chizuru, this time with a tray of food and what looked like tea and a medicine packet. Her hazel brown eyes fell on him, once again widening in surprise only to narrow with a disapproving frown.

"Saito-san! What're you doing sitting up? You're not even close to ready to be up yet, much less sitting up on your own!" Chizuru exclaimed, standing as she brought the tray forward, setting it on the floor before him. "Honestly, men and their bravado."

Keeping his surprise off his face for being scolded, much less by a girl a few years younger than him, Saito merely stated. "I wasn't trying to show off, or be foolish. I merely wanted to get up. That is all."

"And I imagine it hurt you trying to do so?" at this Saito winced, like a child caught in the kitchen looking for sweets, nodding only to earn a sigh of annoyance from the girl. "As was clearly predicted, and what you were warned against doing. You're not moving from this bed until you feel close to little or no pain in your side. Do you understand?"

His eyes widened by a slim margin, surprised by her stern words but knew better than to argue so he nodded once more as he said. "Yes."

"Good. Now I've brought you dinner since you missed lunch and it's a good time as any to give you some herbs to boost your body's immune system. It'll taste a bit foul but bear with it and take all of it."

Chizuru informed him, indicating the tray between them.

Polite as ever, Saito nodded again in acceptance. "I will, thank you."

"I know you will, because I'll be watching." She returned, giving him a less than pleased expression, as if he were about to do something he ought not to.

Saito could only stare, confused by what she meant only for the sound of another set of footsteps coming down the hall, this time he knew to be Sannan. Confusion turned to comprehension when the man did appear in the doorway but with two more small food trays, both laden with food and mugs of tea. They clearly intended to eat with him though why seemed to escape him. To make sure he ate everything?

Coming to sit across from his friend, Sannan laughed kindly at the man's situation as he set the two trays down onto the floor. "Chizuru-san suggested eating together to help the healing process. Also you might need some help like this morning. Over here?" he asked, having made sure they were a good distance from Saito's.

"Yes, there is fine. Eat the food first before the medicine. Try to eat it all okay?" Chizuru said in reminder before moving to where Sannan had put her tray.

Saito only nodded, knowing he had to eat as much as his body would let him but also not to insult the girl however indirectly. While she and Sannan had meat, vegetables and rice, Saito had gotten another soup, small rice balls and tea. Taking the cover off the soup, it looked be chicken with bits of vegetables, all chopped into small, less than bite size pieces and all in a murky broth that smelled better than it looked. Ever practical and polite, Saito didn't comment or complain and ate as much as he could stomach, which was more than half of the soup and all of the onigiri. Like with all medicine, he used the tea to wash it down. As he poured the mixture into his mouth, he grimaced at the taste, managing to keep his face clear of his displeasure.

Looking over his tray, Chizuru smiled warmly at how little there was left. "Very good, you did well. Continue like this and you just might leave sooner after all. But one mustn't rush these things else they'll just get worse. Sannan-san, if you'd help him back into bed while I deal with the dishes." She said, already on her feet and stacking the dishes before stacking the trays in turn.

"Of course." The bespectacled man responded, smiling as the girl worked, waiting until she was almost to the door and out of the way before moving forward. Same as that morning, he helped Saito position himself and slowly lie back down, pulling the covers back over him.

When he was comfortable, Saito looked up at his superior. "Thank you Sannan-san."

Sannan merely shook his head. "It's no trouble. Just rest and you'll be better in no time."

"Any news on the men who attacked us?" he asked, honestly curious.

For the first time, the man frowned. "None yet but at least they're gone for the time being. If we're lucky, they've given up looking for us." The frown vanished, replaced by a reassuring smile. "At any rate, you should try to rest up. Hijikata-san won't be too pleased with me if you go back worse than you are."

Saito didn't answer but he nodded anyway. He was sure that their vice-captain was worried sick that someone had managed to injure him. Now that he thought about it, most who wielded the swords of their trade could barely scratch him, much less give him a wound as big as the one he received. That in turn begged the question: were there really that many that even he couldn't handle them, or were they that skilled? Either way, it still didn't answer why they'd been attacked. It was easy to recall they hadn't been wearing their normal light blue haori that showed everyone they were part of the Shinsengumi, but yet they'd been attacked anyway. And by all accounts, no one should've known where they were going and why. Deciding not to dwell on it much longer, Saito let himself succumb to sleep once more, the heat and weight of his recent meal quickening his descent.

Toshizo Hijikata scanned the letter he'd gotten from an aide earlier that day for the second time in a row. Just thinking about its contents made him irritated, scratching at the back of his head past his long black hair. Sannan sending word about their findings was good, but what he had to report wasn't: Saito badly injured and thus stranding them both in Edo in a stranger's house with only a child to aid them. A child! The mere fact that a bunch of drunken ruffians could even scratch Saito, much less wound him was a scary thought in itself. Sitting in his quarters that doubled as his office, Hijikata scowled with fierce purple eyes at the neatly written kanji before him in irritation. As of yet, no one knew about the letter but him, mostly out of concern that things might spiral even further out of control. Another factor was how quickly the letter had arrived, normally it would take nearly a month for the message to arrive since the two cities were so far apart. His only conclusion was that it'd come by a horse messenger else it would've taken forever to arrive, having dispatched his two companions nearly a month before and by the date on the letter it was sent a few days ago. Which meant it would be over a month before they got back, which only meant he and the other captains had to work hard to pick up the slack.

"Hijikata-san? May I come in?" a familiar voice asked from behind the shoji, breaking Hijikata from his thoughts.

Turning to face the door, he answered, knowing who it was. "Of course."

Sliding the door open, captain of the Shinsengumi Isami Kondo entered, wearing his usual dark blue haori over the rest of his clothes against the approaching autumn chill, a small gust ruffling the odd short and spiky hair on this head. In a roughly traditional style, the rest was in a knot at the back of his head, all of it nearly as dark as Sannan's. Kind brown eyes fell on the paper on Hijikata's desk, speaking as he came to sit some distance away from his fellow warrior. "A letter? What does it say?"

"It's a letter from Sannan-san in Edo, saying they found Koudou's

house-."

"That's wonderful." The captain exclaimed, reacting happily as he did with most good news. Then again, he was known for having exuberant outbursts when the necessary emotion prompted him.

Hijikata, naturally, remained serious. "â€"but Koudou isn't there and Saito's been injured by some local ronin."

"What!? Someone injured Saito? That's impossible! He's the best swordsman of us all!" Kondo practically shouted in his shock, his face matching the confusion in his voice. "How did this happen?"

Shaking his head, Hijikata could only express his own ire at it all. "Hard to say, only that they'll be held up while he heals, mostly since he can't leave without making it worse not to mention the weather if I read this right. Turns out Koudou has a daughter who's as proficient in medicine as he was. She's aiding them in his recovery. And from what I can tell, she has no idea what exactly her father's been doing."

Kondo's expression calmed, jaw set and eyes sober as he processed the information. "I see, so we're no closer to answers and we have a girl who needs them just as badly as usâ€" how it got this way I'll probably never know."

"That may be true but we have to keep going. At the very least we need to tell the others soon. We do have a meeting with them in a few minutes."

"Right, I'll do my best to break it to them. Still it's shocking. Saito getting injured to where he can't travel? How unusual." The head captain exclaimed once more as he made his way off the floor and out of the room, leaving Hijikata by himself all over again. Dropping his head with a weary sigh, the vice-captain knew he had a long day ahead of him.

To say that Souji Okita was bored of sitting about all day doing close to nothing was the biggest understatement of the month. Hair, a reddish brown compared to his comrades, was knotted somewhat like Kondo's but kept longer just about everywhere else, Souji looking at his companions in vague curiosity: just like they did every day, Shinpachi was teasing Heisuke about his height, age or whatever else their usual verbal jabs were about. Watching from his spot near the door, the laid back prodigy smiled at their ever-entertaining routine. Though Heisuke was smaller and younger, the long haired youth with his rare bright teal colored eyes was as talented as the rest of them, while Shinpachi Nagakura, though older, bigger and having more muscle had a habit of being hotheaded. In truth, the older man was merely playing with the younger boy, as he always had since their days of just being a small group in an even smaller dojo. Moss green eyes, sharp but kind, glimmered with laughter as the larger man laughed at whatever was said, matching his practically green headband, claw necklace and attire. All of it was matched with dark brown hair cut short but wild without the knot as seen in most men of their age.

Another bark of laughter brought Souji's attention to Sanosuke Harada, the only warrior of their group who wielded a spear along

with a sword, his dark rosewood hair kept in a lazy tail to go with his small white and red vest along with red pants and gloves. Laughing and also putting his own two cents on the matter, Sanosuke's own brown eyes were also filled with friendly amusement at the younger male's reaction to their jokes. Half listening to their would-be conversation anyway, Souji chuckled at the display before the sudden movement to his right caught his attention. Turning to see who was coming in, he was a little surprised to see Kondo enter and then Hijikata since normally it was the other way around and some time apart. Within seconds his mind was processing the grim looks on their faces and the fact they'd arrived at the meeting room not just together but in the same mood. There was no denying: something had happened to Sannan and Saito, else they wouldn't look so grim about anything.

"Quiet down! I swear you three make the most noise just for the hell of it!" Hijikata scolded as he sat down on the small pillow just on Kondo's left, as he did in all their meetings. "You'll be glad to know we finally heard from Sannan-san."

"Really? Finally something new! Well? What did he say?" Shinpachi exclaimed into the sudden quiet, only to get admonished by the younger Heisuke.

"Shut your mouth Shinpachi and let him talk! Besides, you were being the loudest anyway." The teen complained, giving the older man an annoyed look.

"Me? I'm pretty sure you were practically yelling just a moment ago. If only your sword was as strong as your voice."

"Dammit Shinpachi you can't stay on top forever! Just you wait! I'll get as good as Souji and show you how much skill I actually have!"

"In your dreams kid." Shinpachi chuckled, earning more curses from the younger boy.

Hijikata's eyebrow was twitching violently before he yelled forcefully. "Enough, all of you!" when they'd gone quiet again, he settled back again and kept talking. "It's true we got word from Sannan-san but not all of it good. It turns out we were right to send Saito with him since they were attacked by some local riffraff almost as soon as they arrived. They found Koudou's house but not before they were both injured in the fighting. From what the letter reports, Saito took the worst of it."

This sent a wave of surprise through the room, Harada the first to speak up. "What? Saito got hurt? That's crazy!"

"That has to be a real crappy joke!" Shinpachi snarled, pointing a finger at their captain in his ire. "Kondo-taicho! Saito is as good as Souji, if not twice as good as us! What the hell were they doing that even he got injured?" Shinpachi growled out, his usually kind eyes burning with irritation.

His face a grim mask, Kondo took his subordinate's anger in stride. "From what we know, they were not only outnumbered but some of them had more skill than they let on. Sannan took a scratch to the arm while Saito took a rather large strike to the side, and was clearly

so bad, he would've bled to death had they not gotten help."

"So they found Koudou? Are they going to bring him back?" Heisuke asked, voice giving away his hope that the search for the doctor had finally ended.

"No, Koudou wasn't there. But apparently his daughter was."

Letting out a cough of surprise, Souji spoke up for the first time with a dry smirk on his lips as he chuckled at the news in mock amusement. "Daughter? He never said anything about a kid. Are you sure they found the right house Kondo-san?"

"More than sure, they're quite certain in fact. Apparently she's quite proficient in medicine and is housing them until Saito's well enough to make the journey back. The most we can do now is wait for more news." Hijikata stated, perfectly serious like always.

A small silence fell over the room before another question rose up, Shinpachi much calmer in his inquiries. "So where does that leave the experiment? What of the subjects?"

This time Kondo spoke with as much authority as he could muster. "All of that's on hold for now, or at least until Sannan gets back. Our best bet is to keep an eye on the subjects as we always have and hope none escape. I leave it to you all to hunt down any who succeed."

"Yes sir." They responded collectively, the captain letting out a sigh of relief.

"Good, now that's all for now. Head back to your posts and hope that all goes well and not just for us."

Staring at the garden outside of his room, Chikage Kazama found the perfectly cut trees and shrubs along with the large koi pond boring. Eyes like a pair of red rubies set ablaze paired with his short, dirty blonde hair, the pureblood oni clan leader knew he had to keep his temper in check until his spies came back. Sure enough, from the other side of the room, the shoji door leading to the rest of the house slid open. He didn't bother turning around as the voice of one of his minions spoke up in the quiet. "Kazama-sama, we've returned."

"And? What have you found?" he growled in light annoyance. _Damn this filthy human for making me wait. I would just kill him if he wasn't so useful._ He thought, glaring at the calm waters a few feet away from the wooden walkway leading to other parts of the house.

Oblivious to his employer's line of thought, the man spoke with a monotone voice to show his respect for the man. But also hide his fear. "Nothing. We can't find the two warriors anywhere. It's possible they're in the girl's house."

This was enough to make Kazama turn to face the man, who was sitting by the door, practically kneeling in the face of the oni's ire. "It's been nearly two weeks and we'd have found them at one of the inns by now." He spat viciously before calming, his callous eyes glaring at his servant. "Have the spies near the girl's house reported

anything?"

Choosing his words carefully, the man shook his head. "Very little save that the girl now seems to have guests. She was seen in market the other day being escorted by a man no one knew. A tall man, who wears a pair of swords with glasses from the West."

"Oh? And what of the other one? The one with the purple hair?" Kazama asked, interest making his anger calm down back to a simmer as another flame burned brighter. Anticipation, delight— Greedy, insatiable power.

Again the servant shook his head, not wanting to know just what his master was silently plotting. He was fairly certain it wasn't anything good. "No sign. But one of our men did manage to wound him. He could be in the house."

Turning back towards the garden, Kazama's lips spread in a dangerous smile. "Send someone in to confirm. And when the moment comes— kill them and bring me the girl. I want her untouched and alive. Understand?"

"Yes, Kazama-sama." the man said politely before leaving. He only hoped what he would soon do didn't send him to the afterlife a cursed man.

It took Saito close to a week to finally be able to get up out of bed on his own with little pain, though he still tired easily and found breathing hard if he did too much. But as predicted, he was healing fast and well ahead of schedule, hence why he and Chizuru were in her father's office, surrounded by all his writings, notes and diagrams (even a model of a head which sent a chill down Saito's spine), seated next to each other as they were.

"Up." Chizuru commanded, voice calm but kind as she did. "Good, and down again."

Saito did as he was instructed, his pale face twitching only slightly at the aching pain he felt in his side and ribs. As part of his recovery regimen, Chizuru was having him do exercises to keep the muscles from getting too stiff. In fact, her knowledge on anatomy was proving very extensive to the point that she knew which muscles had been damaged, how badly and what to do to help him get better. Feeling her smaller, delicate hands on his bare arm, guiding his motions through the pain as she watched both his face and uncovered side to gauge everything properly proved to be a bit of a challenge. Though he was getting better, activities such as these still tired him out, which made the heat from her hands feel a bit more soothing than they should, the young woman beside him gripping his left arm with that gentle strength that always amazed him. Any other woman would've been at least a little shy at seeing him in the state of undress he was in, even though his other arm and lower body was still wrapped in the white yukata he'd been given. Chizuru had promised to return his clothes to him once she repaired the damage done.

"Good, you're definitely better today." Chizuru informed him happily, smiling softly as she helped him put the arm back into the empty sleeve, letting him right his clothes by himself. As he did, she moved over to the desk clearly in search of a particular notebook. "Stay this course and you'll be ready come the start of next

week."

"Thank you. You've been most kind." He stated in his usual polite monotone.

Chizuru merely shook her head while she scribbled down some notes on a sheet that looked like it'd already been filled in some of the ways. "I've only been doing what's right, and what's right for the patient. Making sure you get better is my goal if I'm to ensure your organization doesn't lose such a capable swordsman."

He couldn't help but stare. _Surely Sannan-san didn't tell her?_ "How do you know that? You've never seen me fight."

Smiling almost impishly at him, Chizuru's eyes sparkled with knowledge. "Going by the muscles in your arm, you're left-handed which is rare even in terms of all the warriors of our land. Also, Sannan-san expressed his shock that you got injured at all when in all the battles you've been in together, you rarely get even a scratch. If the rogues you fought were as skilled as I'm sure we all believe, then someone was a fool to set them loose. They were cowards to attack you the way they did." With a sigh, she put down the brush, blowing on the drying ink a little before writing some more. "At any rate, you may be feeling better now but you should still try to take it easy. Now if you wait a moment, I can get your clothes."

"You fixed them?" he asked, honestly curious. He'd been wearing clothes meant for stay-in patients the whole time. To finally wear was truly his would definitely help him feel more himself again.

Quickly writing with a careful hand, Chizuru nodded past her look of concentration at getting everything down. "What I could. At the very least the inner layers were only bloodied but your kimono itself took the worst of it. I know the seamstress down the street very well and she was able to replace them all with the same material. She sent them over early this morning."

Stunned a stranger would take such initiative, even with permission, Saito found himself responding a bit more openly than he normally would. Especially when his voice went up a level and his face contorted in awe. "There was no need to go to such lengths! Surely it cost you-!"

"Very little, in fact less than it normally would. The material your kimono is made of is quite common, the color thankfully in stock and making it was simple thanks to the measurements from your old one. Turns out her son has had a bit of a fever for while and asked my advice. Money is hard to find in Edo, so we simple folk do we can. What little money it did cost me wasn't much so don't get excited over it." Chizuru stated kindly, cutting him off before he went further into his rare impromptu rant. From the smile on her face, she found his reaction very amusing.

Cowed back into silence, the stoic warrior had no choice but to submit to the young woman's words. "Thank you."

Getting to her feet, leaving the notebook open to dry, Chizuru took his response in stride, like she seemed to do with everything else. "And that's more than enough. The most that could be saved was your

scarf, and that was just simply wet. It just needed to be cleaned. You'll be getting that back too."

Saito couldn't think of what to say, forced to watch as the girl left the room in satisfaction he was unable to protest to what had already been done. In fact, the young woman seemed more than happy to do it for a man she barely knew and would likely never see again once he left. With a glance at the window, he measured that it was close to noon though the sun was still hidden behind thick clouds. _Since Chizuru is on this side of the house, I imagine Sannan-san is dealing with lunch._ The warrior thought as he sat, ever patient. Like a true warrior should be.

Sannan was losing his patience. He didn't normally cook and when he did, even he was surprised it was remotely close to edible. Now, in spite of all his efforts, he feared that either Saito's daily soup would either be undercooked or burn. The soup, a combination of herbs, vegetables and meat had been prescribed to his fellow captain by their hostess. He'd been able to finish the onigiri with great success and had overcome the troubles his and Chizuru's meat and vegetables usually gave him. Only soup seemed to be his most infernal foe, the multicolored mess of food looking suspiciously like muck rather than a healthy dish meant to aid in the healing process. He'd even followed the recipe exactly as Chizuru had instructed, exactly! He wasn't an accomplished orator and strategist for nothing. But to be defeated by something as simple and mundane as soup? Absurd!

I did this right, I know I did! For heaven's sake it's soup! He thought to himself, staring at the black pot with a furious stare. From what he could tell, he'd done well but that wouldn't be true until it was tasted. When his courage became strong enough, Sannan found a soup spoon and dipped the piece of cutlery into the thick broth, even getting a bit of meat and carrot along with it. Sniffing it, the bespectacled man couldn't smell anything wrong with it, being that it smelled like soup and all. After a moment of awkward tension despite being by himself, Sannan finally brought the spoon to his mouth, consuming the entire scoop in a moment of reluctant chewing of the meat and carrot. Much to his surprise, and relief, it all tasted as it should and the piece of meat had even fallen apart as soon as his teeth tore into it. pleased with himself and that no one was around to see his taste test, Sannan went on to oversee the rest of the food when a movement outside the kitchen window caught his eye. For a few seconds, he merely thought he was just seeing things, until a second one went by and only then could he see it wasn't just a shape: it was a person! The lunch food forgotten, Sannan quickly turned and left the kitchen, silently thankful he left his swords where he knew he could find them.

Chizuru had left Saito to let him dress in private, which gave the warrior time to properly examine the new clothes she'd gotten for him. The cloth it was made of, likely a common material in Edo, were all of good quality and worth whatever price they were originally posted under. As he put on the under layers, the effort of it only making him slightly fatigued, was worth it compared to his old attire. He'd been meaning to get a new set within the last few months, and mentally thanked his hostess for her foresight. Getting the black kimono on, the pitch black material the same as his old one, fit perfectly as Chizuru had promised. _Whoever the seamstress is she's a talented woman._ Saito thought as he tied it all off with his belt before looking down at his scarf. Like his belt, it was

one of the few things of his that could be saved from all the blood and tearing. Donning the scarf for the first time in almost two weeks, Saito felt a rare sense of comfort at the cloth's familiar weight. He was about to reach for his swords when something caught his attention: his scarf actually smelled a little off. Momentarily confused, he reached to bring a section of it closer to his nose, sniffing it curiously only to be met with the scent of blossoms. A rare blush spread unbidden across his pale face as he stared at the simple scarf, his logical mind trying to process this unforeseen irregularity. It turned out to be a real struggle for him as he pondered why something of his would smell this way. _Did she wash this with her own soap?_

His reverie was broken by a high pitched scream near the back of the house, making him start at the sudden noise. The scarf and its scent forgotten, Saito grabbed his sword and slammed the door to his room open, desperately ignoring the pain in his side as he ran. His left lung was burning as he rounded a corner to find that Chizuru was indeed the source of the scream, and that she was faced with one of the rogue warriors he and Sannan had encountered not even a week before. In fact, this particular man even had the same cruel grin on his lips, gripping his sword with one hand and reaching for Chizuru with the other. With quick, stumbling steps the young woman moved out of the bandit's reach.

"C'mere little girl, I won't hurt you. Promise." The rogue stated in a less than reassuring tone, his nasty grin not helping any.

This only made Chizuru back away faster, careful not to stumble as she did. "I will not! You leave this house right now!" a blur of black and white filled her vision, the sound of a sword being drawn as she recognized her patient standing in front of her like a human shield, making her call out. "Saito-san!"

"Stay behind me, Yukimura-san." He commanded, hoping his body would obey him in his intent on keeping the young woman from harm. Keeping his breathing even was proving to be a task in itself but he stood his ground.

In front of him, the rogue jumped away then frowned, another one already coming through the back door they'd knocked over to get in. The first thug was already snarling at Saito in his unpleasantly gruff voice. "You again? Look I ain't got any issue with you. Just leave now and I won't cut you to pieces like my friends did last time."

From the other end of the hall, the sound of another sword being drawn made the two thugs turn to see Sannan, standing tall and furious in the half shadows of the house. His glasses and blade both flashed dangerously as he spoke in a stern tone. "A threat you won't be using again. Now leave, else my friend and I will deal with you properly."

"Shit." Backing away, the pair edged away from the two blades ready to come down on them. Once in the yard and safely away from the blades the first thug paused only to curse loudly at them, his voice a rough grating maybe from too much alcohol. "This ain't over, we'll be back!"

The sharp sounds of their running feet over loose stones quickly

receded, allowing the trio to relax once the rogues were truly gone. With the crisis gone, Saito all but collapsed, his breath coming in almost harsh gasps as sweat threatened to drench his new clothes. Only Chizuru's strong but ever gentle grip kept him from becoming a heap on the floor as she helped him sit down on the wooden surface. Without a word he only nodded his thanks to her as he heard Sannan sheathe his sword before rushing over, taking Saito's for him as he spoke in a truly worried voice. "Yukimura-san, did they hurt you?"

"No, I'm fine. Saito-san, you really shouldn't be running around like that! Stay put until you catch your breath." She admonished, earning only another nod as the stoic warrior grasped at his side, his jaw set in silent pain. Turning to the other warrior, Chizuru asked. "Were those the men you confronted last week?"

At this, Sannan looked ashamed. "Yes, but I honestly believed we'd dealt with them. I'm so sorry Yukimura-san."

"It's not your fault. To think they would be so bold, and in daylight! I'm not sure what's going on but it's clear it's not safe to stay here anymore." She grumbled before letting out a tired sigh, looking at the taller man with new resolve. "Sannan-san, pack our lunches and some food for the road, I'll take Saito-san to get some things packed."

Sannan couldn't help but blink in surprise at the order. "Yukimura-san?"

"We're leaving and I'm going with you whether you like it or not. Saito-san still needs medical care and I know your honor wouldn't stand to see me left to deal with these rogues all alone. I do have some sword training, and a small sword that belongs to my family so I won't be completely helpless. At the very least deal with this now than deal with me a month or so from now when I appear on my own to look for my father." Chizuru explained, jaw set as she spoke with a firm tone.

"You're certain about this?"

Chizuru nodded, looking Sannan right in the eye. "Quite certain. My father's colleague Matsumoto-sensei lives only a few doors down so this part of town won't be without a medical professional. You need my aid and I need to find my father if he's even still alive. Is that not a fair trade?"

Thinking this over for a moment, the samurai finally nodded, reluctant but seeing the logic in the girl's words. "Alright, I'll begin at once but we must move quickly. There's no telling when those men might come back. It might also be wise of you to dress as a boy."

"As a boy? Why?"

"It will help you blend in, and to avoid drawing attention. They'll be looking for two men and a young woman, not two men and a young man. At the very least, it will throw off their scent." The bespectacled man explained, his face twisted in concern. The last thing they wanted was to be attacked on the road because someone recognized Chizuru as a potential target.

"I see. My neighbor does have some clothes no one will miss that may fit me well. We should get started if we wish to be out of town before sunset." She said with a nod, taking Saito's sword from the other man before he left to head back to the kitchen. Saito was still holding his scabbard in his right hand and with Chizuru's help, put the blade to rest. Much to Saito's surprise, the girl handled his blade with ease. Assured the blade was safely in place, she didn't hesitate to grip his arm, ready to help him stand back up again. "Ready Saito-san?"

"Yes, and I'm sorry." He said as he got back onto his unsteady feet, his side still burning from the earlier excitement.

Confused, Chizuru stared up at him. "Sorry? For what?"

"Iâ€¦" suddenly, it was as though his throat didn't want to work. _I want to say for not being fast enough. For not being well enough to protect you! But why can't I say it?_ After a moment he gave up, looking away. "Nothing."

With this, Chizuru let out a small chuckle, giving him an oddly affectionate smile. "Silly man. Let's get moving. I'll need your help getting everything in order."

"Yes." He managed as she all but dragged him along but didn't go too fast to tire him out again, this time heading for the office and the bedrooms.

The next hour or so was spent in a whirlwind of finding items and proper containers all before packing it all in semi-proper fashion. In the end, Chizuru packed only a few sets of clothes, some medicine and notes as well as paper, brushes and ink. Thanks to the ever understanding neighbor, she even got a few sets of boy's clothes, all clean and one she immediately put on before leaving the house. As ordered, Sannan packed up their lunches and any extra he thought would come in handy along with anything that would spoil. Strapping the pack on, he left the kitchen to find Saito and Chizuru in the front foyer where he and his fellow warrior had stumbled in not even a week or so before, Chizuru with a large pack of her own and a short sword as promised. Seated on the wooden floor but not covered in blood and rain, Saito looking to his companion, eyes betraying his displeasure as he held the much smaller pack in his arms. Clearly his friend didn't want to feel like a burden to spite his current condition. Her smile ever kind, Chizuru turned to greet the bespectacled samurai. "All ready Sannan-san?"

"I have as much as I dared. And you?" he asked, marveling at the simple transformation the girl had undergone. Despite her age, she either wasn't that shapely or knew how to hide her form with the clothes she'd obtained, her face plain enough to pass for a boy's. She even had a wicker hat in her hands. The wakizashi was already in her belt, its navy red scabbard seemed to couple with the crimson tassel hanging off the end of the hilt. And from the look of it, both were in good condition.

Chizuru nodded, not at all bothered by his scrutiny. "I grabbed as many of my father's books and my own notes. Even some daily medicine for Saito-san, along with a few other things should you and he have need of it. But we should hurry: my neighbor has convinced a local

merchant to take us out of town in his supply wagon and they'll be at the corner any minute."

"How did you manage that?" he couldn't help but ask. _Just how resourceful is this woman?_ He thought as she went on to explain.

"I have many friends in this town Sannan-san, more so since my father left. My father's colleagues should be able to care for them while I'm gone. As it turns out, the merchant is meant for Kyoto and will be grateful to have a skilled warrior or two in case of trouble."

I should've known there was a catch. "So you've offered our services then?"

Chizuru nodded. "And my own, should the need arise. Saito-san may not be able to fight yet but you certainly can. I also told you I'm quite capable with this sword, though if this continues I may get more training than I desire." Turning to Saito, she helped him to his feet again before turning back to the other man. "If you'd lead the way Sannan-san. We need to be on the corner on the left of the house."

Nodding in understanding, Sannan did as he was bid, opening the door and casually heading out into the open. His sharp vision searched the street and what little groups of people for any enemies and found none. Looking back he called out. "The way is clear."

Giving him a nod in turn, Chizuru had put the hat on Saito, the way the man was squinting in the afternoon sun a hint on why. Turning back to the street, Sannan went to the front gate to open it just as Chizuru was shutting the door to the house. With some encouragement, they had Saito moving at a stable and steady pace, but didn't dare press him to go faster for fear of making his breath sounding harsher than it already was. As promised, a large wagon with a tan canopy sat ready at the corner, two men in the driver's bench. One was young and well built if a bit scrawny, the other an older man with graying hair. Spotting the trio, the old man nudged the younger off the bench as he called out to Sannan. "You the warrior?"

"I am, and you're the merchant I presume?" he called in turn as they got closer, silently thankful their section of the street was empty.

The old man nodded, his tired eyes still holding some fire in them as he spoke. "That I am, and I'm glad to have someone who looks capable on this journey. The young lady tells me you can't afford many stops but I make no promises. You're more than welcome to come sit with me. My assistant will get your friends into the back." At that the younger man moved to take Saito's arm to guide him to the back, Chizuru following after giving their driver a deep bow.

Watching this for a moment, Sannan smiled his relief as he moved to obey the merchant's command, settling easily onto the wooden bench. "Thank you, you're most kind." Giving the older man a bow of his own, he stated. "I'm Keisuke Yamanami."

From his seat the older man bowed, if a bit awkwardly, a broad smile spreading across his wrinkling face. "I'm Michio Imia of Imia Supply and your words are enough. If I'm so lucky, you Shinsengumi will need me for more than just smuggling people but goods! Naturally I know

how to keep my mouth shut on the road so you've no need to fear an old man like me."

"I see, that's very reassuring." Sannan retorted without sarcasm. In fact he was even more relieved that Chizuru had found someone trustworthy to aid them.

The man let out a gruff laugh as scratchy and deep as his voice. With a soft crack of the reins, the wagon shuddered into motion as the two horses tied to it began to walk. "Hmm too true. After all, I know something about warriors like you. My own son wanted to be one, even got into a decent dojo."

"Oh? Did he do well?" Sannan asked, honestly curious. Though he didn't know of any samurai named Imia, but if the merchant's son was any good it wouldn't take long.

"Very well! He actually had the talent for it! But that didn't matter when he got jumped by nearly ten bandits, fought them best he could to keep them from breaking into a local lord's mansion. The guards tried to help and stop the bleeding but it was too late. Helped the patrol catch the bastards and get them executed. You could say I honor his memory by doing this for you." The merchant stated somberly, though his smile never faded, grey eyes sparkling with pride only a father could have for his child.

Shocked, Sannan had the sense to speak in a grim tone as well. To die so young, even for such an honorable reason was still tragic. "I'm sorry. I'm sure he fought bravely."

Michio nodded, accepting the man's apology while easing the wagon into a turn at the intersection they'd come upon. "I think so too. It's what keeps his mother from crying every night and his brothers from shying away from their own dreams. Even joined the same dojo, and have working hard to be more than just better than their brother. They want to be just as good as him too."

"That's a noble goal. I hope they achieve it." the samurai stated confidently. Even he wasn't fool enough to scoff at such hopes, knowing that he and his friends once had the same dreams themselves. Only until a few years ago had such a dream come true.

Again Michio nodded, taking his passenger's words in stride. "So do I. I'll see them for the first time in a year after I pass through Kyoto. All I can ask of you is help me get there."

"It would be my honor, sir." Sannan responded, smiling at his host.

Once again, Michio chuckled heartily. "The honor is mine."

Inside the wagon, Chizuru listened to the conversation with a smile. She'd heard that story before and even now, it tugged at her heart. Beside her, Saito was as emotionless as ever, though his eyes gave away how thoughtful he was about the man's tale. Across from them, the merchant's assistant didn't say anything, listening to his employer's words with a tight lipped look on his face. Clearly he'd heard this tale before too, and would probably never get used to the hard truth behind it. As the wagon rolled down the street, none of them said anything, peeking out of the canvas canopy on occasion to

gauge where they were. With some maneuvering and a few shortcuts, they were out of the city and in the hills as the sun started to fall. Come evening all they saw was forest and hills, even a bit of a local mountain with the moon's help. They traveled well into the countryside until they could no longer see before finally stopping to make camp, everyone eager to stretch their legs after such a long ride. Once dinner was suggested, Chizuru immediately took charge and drafted the assistant into helping while the other three men worked to set up.

Watching the young woman work and order his assistant around, the merchant let out a hearty laugh. "She's a spirited little thing ain't she? Always has been for years, ever since she was a little girl."

"You've known her that long?" Sannan asked, voicing the inquiry not just for himself, for Saito was looking at the merchant with a curious stare.

The old man just waved a hand passively. "Mostly in passing. Then more so whenever I had to appear to deliver some supply of herbs to her father. She always wanted to hear about things outside the city. Now I guess she'll finally get to see it too. A shame, her father leaving like he did. What kind of man leaves a girl all alone without a word?"

"We'll be sure to ask him when we find him."

Eyes of deep grey fell on eyes of brown, brow quirking in curiosity of his own. "Oh? You're lookin' for him too?"

Sannan nodded, choosing his words carefully. "We recruited him for his skill but he's since vanished. We came here hoping he'd come home and he hasn't. Until we find her father, we'll protect her as best we can." From where he sat, Saito nodded affirmation. Even in his condition, he'd do his best to protect Chizuru.

His mouth a thin line, Michio grunted his approval. "I certainly hope so. Though I'm not sure what you poor boys are mixed up in to leave like you have, but we shouldn't dwell on it. For now, we'd best make way for our hostess, seeing how she's givin' us the eye."

"Talking about me behind my back again Michio-san?" Chizuru asked as she and Hazuo the assistant came over with fresh food in hand, handing out bowls of stew and plates of onigiri.

Suddenly bashful, Michio scratched the back of his head as if guilty. "Only a little. It's like I'd think to speak ill of you."

Chizuru scoffed in her amusement. "Says the man who cried like a child when he almost crushed his hand beneath the wheel of his own supply wagon."

"See what I mean? Spirited." Michio exclaimed, taking a bite of his food even as Chizuru sat down with her own across the fire from him. "Almost wish I had a daughter. Almost."

Dinner passed in silence, as was the rest of the night until morning. As the sun rose, so did they with a quick breakfast prior to packing and getting on the road again. Getting back into the wagon was

especially hard for Saito as all the excitement and the hard ground was already wearing down on him. The next few days in the wagon didn't help either, where the road was uneven and bumpy more than anything. Every rock and dip made the wagon shake and drop, making the pale-skinned man turn another shade paler but he never said a word or made a noise, the pain in his eyes and the small beads of sweat the only betrayal of discomfort. As their journey continued, Chizuru and the assistant, Hazuo, did all they could to make the passage more comfortable for the samurai. Whether it was with medicine or with whatever blankets they had, the pair even went as far as giving him a bench all to himself to lie down on when on rougher roads. A time or two it was so bad, Saito couldn't even leave the wagon from the pain his body was practically hammering him with. Even when they passed through the much smoother roads, Saito still felt like someone was slicing him open all over again. Aside from Saito's discomfort and the occasional stop, their trek took all of six days, much shorter than the time they'd spent getting to Edo two weeks earlier.

"Chizuru-chan!" the older man called softly from the driver's bench, making Hazuo open the flap of the canopy to let some early morning light in.

Tired and a little drowsy, Chizuru sat up and edged over the opening, speaking past a sleepy yawn. "Yes, Michio-san?"

"Wake your warrior friend Keisuke! I need to know where to drop you lot off." The old man informed her, yawning in response.

Chizuru felt her body go still as her mind broke from the hazy fog of sleep. "We're there? Kyoto?"

"Just about, we're over the hill but it won't be long now. We'll be in time for the late morning traffic." He said, making Hazuo release the flap as he focused on driving the wagon.

Once again in the dark of the wagon, Chizuru carefully stepped over Saito who was on the floor to the other bench where Sannan had curled up the night before. Making sure not to startle the warriors, Chizuru gently took hold of the man's shoulder and shook it as she whispered urgently at him. "Sannan-san! Sannan-san can you hear me?"

Blinking awake, clumsily fumbling for his glasses, Sannan looked at the girl with a sleep-filled expression on this face. "Yes Yukimura-san, what is it? Has something happened?"

"We're coming on Kyoto. Michio-san says he needs directions to your headquarters when we get there." Chizuru informed him, letting go as the man shook himself awake.

"Really? At the very least we should eat something. Should we wake Saito-san?"

Chizuru shook her head, looking down at the still sleeping man with worry. "No, he needs his rest and hopefully he'll get more when we arrive. But getting something to eat might help some. He'll need to be awake for when we get there, see if he can walk on his own or not."

Scowling at this, Sannan rubbed his chin in thought. "Our comrades

are very capable so we shouldn't have many issues. I just hope our captain and vice-captain are understanding about having you there."

"I leave that to you Sannan-san. I trust you to do what you can on my behalf. Only trust me with the welfare of our patient."

"You don't seem to be giving me much choice." He stated with a cool laugh. They hadn't had many choices in the past month.

Chizuru smiled sadly in him, the expression somehow visible in the dark of the canopied wagon. "Even if I weren't a woman, I wouldn't have many choices. With your help, I'm making a better one than any other available to me." Suddenly a frown overcame her smile, her hazel brown eyes full of concern. "Please tell me you don't think ill of me for doing so."

Appalled, Sannan was quick to react but careful not to shout. "What? Of course not! It's just a surprise, that's all." With a sigh he took a breath prior to saying. "But as I told Michio-san, we'll do all we can to protect you from those men back there if they choose to chase us. I'm not sure who they are or what they wanted but risking your safety would be a bad choice. I certainly won't go back on that now."

"Thank you." The girl said with as much sincerity as she could muster. "Well we should get started. Michio-san will need the energy to make it through the traffic we're headed for."

Chizuru's words were almost prophetic in nature as they rolled into the dirt streets of Kyoto, carefully skirting the crowds and other carts roaming the waking city. Had he not eaten, it's likely an accident or two would've occurred if the older man had even been remotely sleepy or distracted. With Sannan's very accurate instructions, they got to the mansion that was the Shinsengumi headquarters with little trouble, only stopped at the gates by the two standing guard for the hour. Once one of their captains poked his head out and ordered them to let the wagon by, and one to run ahead for assistance, the wagon eased its way in, the two horses moving at a slow walk as Michio encouraged them to. Finally, the bulky wagon came to a stop in the vast courtyard which was mostly empty but would soon be bustling as Sannan got out to find someone but didn't say who. Following Chizuru's instructions, Michio and Hazuo moved to help Saito out of the wagon even though he only got as far as the back end, forced to sit when he proved to be in too much pain even then to walk.

"I'll be alright. I just need to rest a moment." Saito managed to say, his voice softer than usual, face pale and sweaty. From the look Chizuru gave him, she didn't believe a word.

"We'll decide that when you're back in bed. I just hope we didn't rush this." She said, only getting a tired sigh in response. Though he'd never say it, he just wanted to lie back down and sleep some more. His side was killing him and the sun wasn't helping fend off the sweat he was all but drenched with.

They were all distracted by angry shouting in voices only Saito recognized, getting close enough to hear Sannan openly plead. "Please calm down Hijikata-san!"

"How can I?! You're here without a letter warning us! Last you wrote you said that you'd be delayed, now this? Where's Saito?" one of the new voiced demanded from somewhere, sounding all but enraged.

"In the wagon but-!" hurried footsteps cut the man off, several sets joining as Sannan shouted in his concerned uncertainty
"Hijikata-san!"

Rounding the side of the wagon came a man with hair as black as a raven's wing held back in a ponytail going down his back, purple eyes flashing anger and concern all at once as they fell on his wounded comrade. "Saito! Saito, dear gods you look terrible!" his eyes shot around until they fell on Chizuru, who in spite of herself, winced as he started shouting at her instead. "You! How could you let him travel like this?!"

"It's not her fault! All of this can be explained Hijikata-san but only if you calm down! Now please, we need to get Saito inside before he collapses." Sannan cut in, pointing Saito out to the angered man again, making his scowl deepen. Finally the man named Hijikata rounded onto two other men who'd appeared, a tall man with spiky hair and green eyes and a teenage boy with long brown hair and neon teal eyes, both watching their vice-captain curiously.

"You two! Help Saito inside and get him cleaned up! And someone find Yamazaki!" he snarled at them, making them jump at his tone but moved to obey.

Stepping forward, Chizuru stood her ground. "I'm going too." She didn't look away as the vice-captain stared at her as if she'd said something outrageous. "No need to try and stop me. Until he's all better, he's my patient. But I will need my kit and notes from the wagon if your friend Yamazaki and I are to work together in his recovery. And maybe when I'm done, I can move on to you."

Confused by her words, Hijikata stared at her like she was speaking nothing but riddles at him. "What? Me?"

His response only made Chizuru scowl in annoyance but didn't back down. If anything, she was acting like she was a mother scolding her child. "Yes you! Am I right in assuming this isn't the first outburst you've had today?" when the vice-captain didn't answer, stunned at her accurate prediction. Taking advantage of his silence and the stunned looks of the onlookers, Chizuru kept going. "I thought not. It's what you get for not sleeping properly. One can only imagine what kind of health risks exist here with you in charge."

"How dare you-!" he growled, stepping forward to grab her by the arm. Only Chizuru, for all her size and stature, was much quicker. Pressing her index and middle fingers together and striking swift as a blade, the teenage girl struck Hijikata in the shoulder and arm with more strength than the men gave her credit for. Letting out a cough of surprise, Hijikata stumbled back into Sannan who held him upright. Gripping his arm, he was astonished to find that everything from the shoulder down had gone numb and unable to twitch even a finger.

Glaring angrily now, Chizuru stared the vice-captain down as he tried to fathom just how and why his arm wouldn't work. Ignoring his

astonishment, Chizuru continued to give the older man a dressing down. "How dare I? How dare I? This coming from the man, who shouts at strangers, unnecessarily I might add, just because he's upset over his friend's wellbeing? I would half expect such behavior from a half-wit thug on the street, not a master swordsman. And don't worry, you'll get feeling back in your arm in a half hour or so." Relaxing with an annoyed huff, her face lost its ire as she turned to look at the elderly merchant still seated on the driver's bench, watching it all with barely hidden amusement. Speaking with sudden politeness she said to him. "Michio-san, if you and Hazuo-kun would be so kind as to unload my things? I have a patient that requires my attention."

"Yes, milady." He said just as politely, holding down his laughter. With a nod, Chizuru bade the two men now holding Saito upright to lead the way, following in step as they did. Michio didn't speak again until she was out of earshot, looking at the two samurai watching her go. "You boys have done it now. Keep it up like this, and she'll be yellin' your ears off. Nearly ripped mine right off when I damn near broke my arm on a job. Thankfully she only acts like that because she's worried."

"Sounded angry to me." Hijikata grumbled as he reclaimed his footing, thanking his friend for his aid with a nod.

Michio let out a gruff laugh. "You've never met a woman from Edo have you? Thought not." His face lost its mirth as he stared at them with the most serious face Sannan had seen the man wear. "At any rate, she's your concern now but I may come by to check on her now and again. And as I told your friend with the glasses, you Shinsengumi fellas can depend on the Imai Supply Company for all your delivery needs, be it pots or in this case people."

"We'll keep that in mind and thank you." Sannan said, giving the older man a deep bow, nodding to Hazuo that he'd deal with their luggage.

At that Michio's smile returned. "You're most welcome, sir. In a flash his expression was somber again, grey eyes filling with sadness and regret. "Just keep your promise now. Don't make this old man regret leaving that girl in the hands of a reputable group like yours."

"We'll do our best. My regards to your family Michio-san." Sannan responded, bidding the guards to open the gates to let the man and his wagon out again.

"Gents." The older man said with a polite nod, waiting until his assistant was back on the driver's bench next to him before guiding the two horses back out into the streets of Kyoto. Once in the streets again, he turned a corner toward the market, and was gone.

To say Chikage Kazama was angry was like saying the moon and sun chased each other every day for eternity. But to have no choice but face that anger with little protection, or in this case, excuses, was a scary ordeal. Such as it was for the ronin who worked for said oni, knowing that even after telling the man as much as he could offer, he probably wasn't going to leave that room alive.

"What do you mean she's gone?" he openly snarled, eyes of ruby red aflame with boundless rage. The ronin was lucky he hadn't pulled his sword yet. "Where could she have gone?! I thought I told you to watch the house! And I certainly thought I told you to kill those two samurai too!"

Bowing a little deeper, close to kneeling on the floor, the ronin managed to speak with as much confidence as his voice would allow which wasn't much. "Forgive our error Kazama-sama but they must've left some time after we were chased out of the house. I had ordered our men to hold back until we could scout where they were. I even went in myself but they were there before we got so much as a step inside! My comrade and I left when they threatened us with the promise of our return." Pausing for a response and getting none, the ronin kept going, hoping his words were enough to keep him from being beheaded. "Our spies were still watching the house when we left! All they could say they saw was the man with glasses leaving just before a boy and a man with a hat on! We were uncertain of what to do so we left some men at the house and had others follow the wagon they got into."

Kazama's curiosity piqued at this, anger replaced by inquiry. "A wagon? They got into a wagon? Where did it go?"

"Apologies my lord, but we lost it in the late afternoon traffic. It's possible the driver had been warned against our presence and took cautionary measures. But we did ask a few people about the wagon and they say it left the city headed west." The ronin added, staring at the floor mats like they would be the ones to save his life should his employer not believe him.

"West you say?" Kazama mumbled out loud thoughtfully, anger forgotten in place of contemplation on the ronin's words.

"Yes, my lord." The man answered, silently thankful the conversation was going a lot smoother now. "As you ordered, some of us stayed at the house to be sure they were still inside and came straight here when we discovered they were not."

"I see. So you're not so useless after all." Kazama growled, annoyed again but without the enraged bite from before. "Send the men out immediately and look for either the samurai or the wagon. And it's likely the girl dressed as a boy to fool you. Keep that in mind next you or your men see her. Remember your initial order still stands: bring me that girl alive."

The ronin bowed again in acceptance of the oni's words. "Yes, Kazama-sama. I'll prepare to leave at once." With that he and his lieutenant left the room, thankful they still had their jobs and their heads.

Ugh! Twenty pages. Twenty! Dedicated, am I not? I should hope so! Damn near busted my fingers getting this done. I'm glad my version of Chizuru is going over so well with everyone, it takes a lot of weight off. I've never been able to do kind and meek women. Anyway! I thank everyone who's faved and reviewed so far and am loving your support! Keep it up cuz your opinion matters! Hopefully the wait was worth it but you're gonna have to wait some more as we move on to:

Next chapter:

Chapter 3: The Wrath of a Female Physician

Though Chizuru is newly arrived in Kyoto and the mansion housing the Shinsengumi, loyal but barely acknowledged servants of the Bakufu, she wastes no time finding her place or ratherâ€¦ making one! What's more, she's going out of her way to make it impossible to get rid of her, whether they like it or not! In the meantime, can Saito figure out his feelings toward his caregiver before it destroys their relationship before it starts? You're just gonna have to wait for:

**Chapter 3: The Wrath of a Female Physician!**

3. Chapter 3: The Wrath of a Fem Physician

Hi everybody! Blue here with another chapter of '_Tears of the Demon_'. And yes I do plan on getting to why I've named it thus but until then, please enjoy my latest installment with everything it has to offer. **Special mention!**: my heartfelt thanks to a guest who goes by the name Anime Aishiteru for giving a glowing and kind review. Well AA, if you know me, I like long and detailed so I work hard for all the details and descriptive scenes you love so much. I'm glad you and others are enjoying this very much and hope you stick around for more. As I also mentioned, this is slightly AU and I kinda went OOC with Chizuru since the 'weak useless female' isn't my thing. Read my other works and you'll see my own OC's are basically the same. But enough on that. Once again, I don't own HSK though word is they've got a movie coming out in August so keep an eye out. Enjoy!

"Iii" = speech

Iii = thought

Chapter 3: The Wrath of a Female Physician

Chizuru Yukimura sipped at a mug of tea she'd received from a kind man name Inoue who'd come to visit her in her new room. He'd smiled at her kindly as she politely accepted the proffered tea, his kind face and expression somehow matching his bald head and black top knot of a samurai warrior. Though he didn't wear his swords, Chizuru could tell he was a well-seasoned fighter with her sharp eyes. Nobody's hands got that rough writing all day. Still the older man had been polite and understanding, not at all bothered she was a girl in boy's clothing in a place where women certainly didn't belong.

"This place has needed someone with both sense and voice for a long time. I'm glad Sannan-san and Saito-san found you. There's only so much an old man can do to get these stubborn upstarts to look after themselves properly." He'd said before he left, leaving her alone to collect her thoughts and organize her things. Sorting through her clothes for something to wear that night, Chizuru wondered about who did the laundry and where. Thinking of her own clothes, she had more or less been sleeping in them for a week. _Maybe I can get a bath before I go to bed tonight._

Her thoughts were interrupted but footsteps coming closer outside her

door, but she didn't turn around, having an idea who it was and why. Sure enough the footsteps stopped outside her door, as a male voice as young as hers called through the shoji. "Chizuru-chan! It's Heisuke Todo! May I come in?"

"Come in!" she called, shifting to face the door as it was opened by the familiar boy from earlier. "And why called me 'Chizuru-chan'? We don't even know each other."

A little taller than her but likely just as old, the brunette smiled kindly as he stepped into the room, teal eyes full of a gentleness that most warriors didn't possess. "Well I'm not about to call you 'Yukimura-san' and I'm not old enough to be called 'Todo-san' so you can just call me Heisuke, okay?"

Seeing the logic in this, Chizuru nodded, smiling in turn. "Okay, Heisuke-kun." Before an awkward silence could fall over them, she asked. "Did you need something?"

Epiphany dawned on his face, replaced by a shy smile at his fumble. "Ah yes, Kondo-san wants to see you so he sent me to get you."

"Kondo? Is he the leader here?" Chizuru inquired, getting to her feet, her white hakama bearing light wrinkles from sitting too long. She was certain her dark red (not pink though some of her attire is pink to keep the universe) haori had wrinkles all on the back from long hours sleeping either in the wagon or on the ground.

Heisuke nodded, watching her rise and moving to give her space to walk. "Yes, he's our captain. Sannan-san has been working on making sure we all hear you out, especially after all you've done for Saito-san."

"It's nothing. I just did what any other physician would do even if I'm not fully trained and certified. And I'm fully prepared to keep helping, even long after he's better." Chizuru responded with a shake of her head, a light blush coming across her face at the compliment. "But enough on that now. I'm certain your captain doesn't like to be kept waiting."

"Right. This way." The young man managed as he turned away to lead her out of the room, fighting down a blush of his own. He'd known her only two minutes and he was already acting a fool! If Chizuru noticed his emotional turmoil she gave no sign.

The journey to the meeting room took all of five minutes, Heisuke announcing their arrival before opening the door to let Chizuru enter first. Inside, she recognized Hijikata seated to the left of who she could only guess to be Kondo while Sannan was on the man's left. At the other end of the room was the tall man with spiky hair Heisuke named Shinpachi, the dark red haired man next to him as Harada and the one lazing by the door as Souji. Smiling and nodding politely to each man, Chizuru took her spot before the three leaders, Hijikata staring with hard eyes, Sannan almost appearing nervous while Kondo spoke with the confidence needed for his station. "You are Chizuru Yukimura-san correct?"

Smiling at the kind faced man gazing at her with the eyes of a mentor, Chizuru bowed deeply at him with honest gratitude. "I am. And

I thank you and the Shinsengumi for your hospitality. I realize that an organization like yours has no place for women, but I believe as Sannan-san has told you, our goals are aligned."

At this, Kondo frowned a little, as if upset with himself for failing in his position. "Yes, he mentioned you were worried about your father. As of yet, we still haven't found him despite our efforts. The investigation is ongoing but we're in the dark same as you. You honestly haven't heard from him?"

Frowning in turn, Chizuru shook her head, having risen from her bow to face the captain properly. "Sadly no. He used to send letters but those stopped coming over a month ago. I was hoping to come to Kyoto myself to look for him when your comrades appeared at my door, seeking help. It wasn't until my house was almost raided that we left."

"Raided? Sannan you said nothing of an attack!" Kondo exclaimed loudly, looking to the scholar seated on his right.

"You insisted on seeing her before I could explain everything Kondo-san! We barely had time to pack, much less write a message in case it was intercepted. I don't know who the men were but they were almost insistent." Sannan defended, sending silent apologies to the girl for not ensuring the full story was told.

"Is this true Yukimura-san? They were the same men that'd attacked before?" Hijikata asked, who up until then had only sat there looking grumpy. Now he was interested and was, if begrudgingly, speaking to her with some respect.

Acknowledging him with a nod, her face set in a grim expression, Chizuru didn't look away from the vice-captain's curious stare. "Sannan-san identified one of the men responsible for wounding Saito-san but their actions tell me they're not just another gang of rogue warriors. It's possible they're working for someone who didn't want Sannan-san and Saito-san wandering the city. Why is beyond me. But Sannan-san didn't want to risk my safety should I be their target or just a victim of their rampage to get to him. And it would seem I'm the only person available with the skills to treat Saito-san's injuries."

"You're offering your services?" Kondo asked, sending a wave of astonishment through the room that everyone save Sannan and Chizuru didn't react to.

Once again Chizuru nodded, expression a mask of grim business. "I don't expect special treatment or placement, only a place to work and the freedom to do it properly. And from the look of your haori, this place clearly needs a woman's touch."

Confused, the commander looked between the girl and his dark green haori in pure befuddlement. "M-my haori? What about it?"

"Whoever washed it used a much harsher soap than necessary, which it feels itchy to you and why you keep fidgeting in it. Also, your second-in-command isn't sleeping properly and Shinpachi-san is pretending quite poorly that he doesn't have a sprained wrist."

"What? No I'm not!" Shinpachi exclaimed from the back of the room. This only drew more attention to him as a few of his comrades stared at him dubiously.

Chizuru beat them to the punch. "Heisuke-kun, if you would?"

"Sure!" the young man said almost happily, sitting next to said man like he always did, without hesitation grabbed Shinpachi's right arm and gently squeezed his wrist.

The man's response was immediate, his howl of pain filling the room. "Ow! Dammit Heisuke!" gripping the injured limb protectively, the large man glared at his friend for uncovering his secret. "Just when it was getting better." This only got him a smug look from the younger man, who chuckled happily into the quiet.

Chizuru remained serious, not needing to see the interaction to know what'd occurred. "I rest my case. But as I said, it all depends on you Kondo-san."

"Kondo-san, we can't just send her away when she just got here. More so because Saito-san still needs medical aid Yamazaki may be unable to provide. At the very least we can help her find her father. She's literally offering her services for nothing more than a place to stay! She didn't even charge for Saito-san's care while we were in Edo." Sannan finally cut in, voice serious but full of pleading. He wasn't about to go back on his promise now.

Shocked, Kondo openly gaped. "Wait, she performed medicine, housed and fed you for over a week without pay?" turning his attention to the young woman before him, Kondo could only stare in awe. "Surely this was costly for you!"

"Not really. A good majority of my business is mostly through the use of barter since money is sometimes hard to find. Trust me when I say just about any other physician would've demanded a steep price for the work I've performed. But Saito was improving before we left so the next week or so will be critical. Even I can understand you need to give the best to your troops. I'm not egotistical enough to say I'm the best, but I'm good enough to be an asset. Now I ask you: do you feel the same?" she asked, watching them all with what seemed to be a saintly sort of patience.

Rubbing his chin thoughtfully, humming loudly as he did, Kondo didn't answer for a few moments. Looking between his two counterparts, Sannan nodding and Hijikata shrugging his indifference, he finally turned back to the girl with a spark in his eye. "You drive a hard bargain Yukimura-san! and you're clearly more honest than your father was to us. It's a quality I appreciate and look forward to receiving from you. Alright, it's decided: Yukimura-san will stay here as medical support and daily services. I'll have a talk with Yamazaki, see if he can't get you up to speed on where we stand on such things. And since this is a military operation, I highly suggest you continue to dress as a boy to avoid distracting the troops."

If Chizuru was surprised, she didn't show it as she smiled her understanding. "I see, then so I shall. Though in the meantime, I suppose I should get organized for my future tasks. Shinpachi-san, I fully expect to see you about that wrist later on. Avoiding it could be costly and not just to you."

"Uh, yeah." The large man managed to say sheepishly, earning a round of chuckles.

"Unless the captains have further need of me?" Chizuru asked, looking between them all for the answer.

Smiling kind and widely, Kondo just shook a hand at her. "No, it's perfectly alright. Heisuke! Show Yukimura-san around won't you? We can't have our newly acquired physician getting lost needlessly."

"Yes sir." The young man said, getting to his feet same as Chizuru, ever the gentleman to ensure he opened the door for her and allowing her to exit first before following. As their footsteps and light chatter got further away, the still collected group of men relaxed slightly.

"What a strange girl! Has she always acted like that Sannan-san?" Kondo asked his advisor, wondering if what he'd just witnessed was a one-time thing.

Instead Sannan only nodded, smiling in amusement at his commander's reaction. "More or less. It would seem growing up in a city like Edo gave her qualities most don't develop at such an age. I imagine it stems from her father's practice and how he's constantly away, forcing her to fend for herself. From what I gathered, the two men breaking in was the first time she'd ever been physically threatened before. Leaving her there would've been a mistake."

"Let's all hope we don't regret this. Having that girl around could cause more problems than she's worth." Hijikata grit out, frowning in his annoyance.

Appalled, Kondo was quick to react. "Don't say it like that Toshizo-kun! If it comes to that we'll decide what to do, preferably without getting her killed or worse. Until then, it's business as usual now that Sannan-san is back with us. Harada-san, isn't it about time for your rounds?"

"Ah, yes. I'm on it." the red haired man said, getting to his feet.

"As for the rest of us, let's try to get some work done. As for me, apparently I need to get this haori another round of scrubbing." Much to his chagrin, this statement only earned him a round of chuckles at his predicament, but took them in stride as he too started laughing.

Saito couldn't help but stare blearily at the familiar ceiling of his room as he finally made his way back to consciousness. His memories past sitting in the afternoon sun on the floor of that infernal wagon were hazy at best, but he was sure Hijikata and Chizuru had a shouting match that was something for the record books. What's more, the smaller girl had won! Just more proof that girl was stronger than her small stature and gender gave her credit for. As he lay there in the cool darkness of his room, silently reveling in the feel of clean sheets, Saito couldn't help but wonder if she'd met with Kondo-san yet to convince him to let her stay. As much as he appreciated her skills as healer, whether or not those men from Edo were after her or

not was still unknown. Plus she'd been insistent on coming to find what had happened to her father. The memory of her explaining this to Sannan was crystal clear in his mind, standing tall and not looking away from the only person who could tell her no. To see such traits in one only a few years younger than him pulled at his heart but he was also glad she never lost the kindness that should be extended to all even in harsh times like these. Looking about, Saito found his swords on the floor like before, the golden light of the sun through the window and the shoji door telling him he'd slept the day away. He thought about sitting up and moving around but his body was still fairly sore and he knew if Chizuru caught him, she'd just yell at him again.

As if on cue, footsteps alerted him that someone was coming, and by their step, it was someone he almost didn't expect to see. Sure enough, Chizuru's shadow cast itself across the shoji as she approached, pausing at his door with some sort of tray in hand. She didn't say anything, likely unaware he was awake, before she entered. Still dressed as a boy, Chizuru blinked when she spotted his gaze. Much to his surprise, she smiled at him, as though happy to see him awake. "Well good afternoon Saito-san! And I was worried I'd have to wake you to give you dinner!"

"Thank you." He said, sincere as he watched her move about, vaguely curious in as to why she was still dressed like a boy.

Chizuru merely shook her head as she shut the door behind her. "Just doing my job, even more so now that Kondo-san and the others have agreed to let me stay."

"That's good." Saito replied, inwardly relieved by this news. He had no real experience with their own unit's medic, Yamazaki but he could say that Chizuru was probably better than the quiet shinobi.

Unaware of his train of thought, Chizuru kept talking, likely thinking keeping him up to date would fill in the gaps and give him something to think about. "I even got a tour of the compound. I have to say I've never been in a mansion before, very exciting! And since I may not be able to see to some of your care I've already conferred with your comrade Yamazaki-san on what to do and the like."

Saito blinked at this information, eyes her as she settled near the bed with the tray. "You have more work?"

Chizuru nodded, putting the tray down as she pulled back the sheets some to prepare him for his meal. "Cleaning and organizing mostly. It's no bother since this place is in great need of it. For now it's just a matter of getting settled, making sure I have enough medical supplies, that the food stores are properly stocked. Things a woman would normally do."

"You don't mind?" he asked, honestly curious. For whatever reason, he found her almost one-sided conversations with him interesting.

He was surprised when she just laughed, the sound soft but kind. "It's what I've been doing my whole life! It's just on a larger scale now. Rest assured I'll be drafting a helping hand or two when I need to but aside from that it's fine. Now let's get you upright so you can eat this." She said, moving to take his right arm in hand. Saito responded by laying his hand on her shoulder, the two working

together to lift him up only for him to wince as both his side and spine protested to the action. Watching him with concern as he practically shivered with pain, Chizuru by his observation looked almost _upset_ by his discomfort. "Still sore?"

Taking a few deep breaths, letting his hand fall from her shoulder, Saito nodded after a moment. "Yes, very. I'm fine though."

Chizuru frowned but nodded anyway. "Alright but lie back down as soon as you've finished. I'll be back for the tray and with your medicine. We need to get you back on your regimen come tomorrow."

"Yes, of course." He said, fighting down the more persistent jabs of pain his body sent zipping through him like small bolts of lightning.

"Good. Enjoy your meal." The girl said before moving the tray closer so that he wouldn't have to move much further.

"Thank you."

At that she smiled again before getting up and leaving without another word, quickly vanishing to another part of the mansion compound. He wasn't sure why, but he was a little disappointed she hadn't stayed to eat with him. After living with her for over a week, he'd become too accustomed to her quirks. _I need to focus on healing if I'm ever going to get out of this bed. Anything could happen that the others might need my skill for. But if I rush like I always do, Chizuru will get angry. Why am I weighing in her response?_ Saito thought as he ate his entire dinner though sitting up hurt his back and his still aching side, lingering fatigue already teaming up with the heat and weight of his dinner to make him sleepy. Every time his eyes started to droop and his mind clouding with slumber's darkness, he quickly reminded himself he needed to stay awake long enough for his medicine. And every time, he had to fight a little harder to not fall asleep.

Then, from somewhere, Chizuru's kind voice called to him as something soft and warm came in contact with his shoulder. Only a few seconds of the contact told him it was her hand as she spoke softly. "Saito-san? Why are you still sitting up?"

"Hadâ€¦to stay awake." He managed to say, fatigue making his mind slow and his eyelids feel like lead weights.

When he wasn't sure, but suddenly her hand's gentle weight on his shoulder was gone as she quietly exclaimed. "Goodness already? Well it's a sign from your body that it's trying to fix itself so that's good. Here, drink this."

A dark shape came into his vision that he recognized as a tea mug with what looked like fresh tea and possibly bits of herbs floating in it. She must've poured it into the tea to help me take it. With her help, Saito was able to take a deep sip of the concoction only to nearly spit it back out. Fighting down a cough, his voice came in displeased whisper. "Bitter."

How she heard him, he'd never know but her response was as kind like always. "I know it is but you must drink it all." her words were encouraging and he knew she wouldn't leave until he did, so he took a

breath before taking another sip. Eventually after repeating this process a few times, he'd consumed all of the tea and the medicine mixed into it. Sounding pleased, the mug vanished from his vision as Chizuru continued to speak softly but ever kind. "There we are. Now let's get you situated."

Like a child being guided back into bed by its mother, Saito let Chizuru aid him as she'd done many times before, his aching body singing its relief once he was fully upon the soft mattress again. Whether or not Chizuru said anything he didn't know for once his head came to rest on the pillow, sleep immediately won its fight over him.

The next day was a whirlwind of activity for Chizuru, spent mostly working with Yamazaki that she had a proper clinic set up close to his should either one of them be available to aid the various warriors on the compound. Drafting a soldier or two, she had others look into their food and clothing supply and how and where they were doing their laundering. When they told her they were mostly doing it themselves, the young woman frowned, exclaiming. "Well no wonder your clothes are a mess! For it's clear your mothers never taught you how to do it!"

Safe to say many a soldier suffered through a small class on how to properly wash clothes, depending upon the color, fabric type and even age of the garment. And to be sure she covered her bases, she moved on to sheets and bandages. The rare few took to her training with a vengeance in honest need of the skill and not just to aid the girl in the task, but to ensure they could do it while she was away or otherwise occupied. Come evening time, the young woman was in the kitchen, cooking and schooling both volunteers and draftees in the tasks assigned to them. Doing her share of the work as well, Chizuru gave kind guidance to correct mistakes and glowing comments to success, even congratulating everyone on a job well done when they were finished and the food was ready to serve. It wasn't until the next day that she declared her clinic open that quite a few stepped forward with minor injuries and ailments, Shinpachi decidedly her first patient.

"Hey Chizuru-chan! You in?" a familiar, booming voice asked as a large shadow took up much of the floor.

Turning, Chizuru smiled when she saw her hunch was right. "Ah, Shinpachi-san. Finally decided to appear?"

The large man chuckled sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck as he tried not to look her in the eye. "S-something like that."

"I'm sure. Come on in then and we'll have a look." She said, waving him to the guest pillow across from her, which he practically collapsed onto. Taking his actions in stride, Chizuru took his large right hand and wrist in hand, gently poking and examining the limb. "Hmm, it's actually better than I'd imagined but still a concern. You really shouldn't hide injuries Shinpachi-san. It could affect your work and your ability to function as a warrior."

"But it's minor right? Just like I thought?" the larger man asked, honestly curious for her diagnosis.

Chizuru nodded as she let him go, turning to her cabinet to open a

drawer, sifting through the jars and vials inside. Once she found the one she wanted, she turned back to face him again as she spoke. "It's indeed a minor sprain but you still shouldn't do anything to make it worse. Else you'll just compound the problem until even I can't fix it. You may have to give up being a samurai entirely if it comes to that."

"N-no way!" Shinpachi exclaimed in shock, letting the girl take his arm again, spreading a cool but oddly smelling paste onto his limb before wrapping a bandage tightly over the odd concoction.

Pulling the bandage tight, ignoring his slight wince of pain, Chizuru remained serious as she tied it off. "Yes, I'm quite serious. So try to be more careful in the future alright?"

Testing his hand and found didn't quite hurt anymore, Shinpachi smiled in appreciation at her. "You got it."

"Good, come back in a week and I'll tell you if you can take the bandage off. Now off with you. From what I remember, you have rounds in less than half an hour."

"Thanks Chizuru-chan." He said sincerely, getting to his feet and leaving with a wave.

Waving back, Chizuru was alone again for nearly twenty minutes before another familiar voice called into the quiet of the room, this one more serious and lazy ire. "Morning Yukimura."

Turning once again, Chizuru smiled kindly to see the vice-captain standing at her door, dressed in his usual dark colors. "Ah, Hijikata-san! I wasn't expecting you. How is your arm?"

He seemed to think about ignoring the questions but answered anyway, rolling said shoulder as his exotic purple eyes scanned the room. "Quite well. I see you've made yourself quite at home hereâ€|."

"I sense that you question my intentions." Chizuru said knowingly, smile still on her face, if now close to impish.

Surprised, Hijikata stared at her. "What?"

"Though it's only natural: you and your comrades are military leaders. You need to be wary of anything new and unusual. And my presence is very much along the lines of both. Even though you didn't say much the other day, you clearly disapprove of my being here, no matter how useful I am to the Shinsengumi. Right?"

A bit taken aback by her insight, Hijikata was quick to recover, smooth face once again wrinkled by a frown. "Yesâ€| that still doesn't excuse the fact that a civilian-a woman no less- is in a military compound that could be attacked at any moment. Should something like that happen, there's no real guarantee anyone here would be able to protect you as Sannan has so foolishly promised."

"Saito-san too." Chizuru added, ever casual as she sorted through her notes, eyeing him for his response.

His shock only made her smile wider. "W-what? Him too?"

Nonplussed, Chizuru shrugged. "Naturally, as any warrior would. Sadly his condition makes it hard to keep such a pledge. So unless he or any other fail and I die or I'm told to leave, I see no reason not to think I'm not being protected. Just like how all of you are hiding a dark truth from me."

This was enough to make Hijikata freeze, his blood seeming to stop in his veins though his heart threatened to come up this throat. _Damnâ€| Sannan was right. She is deceptively observant._ Cautiously, he watched her carefully as he went on. "And if we are?"

Again Chizuru shrugged. "Then only time will tell if I'll be informed of what it is, on purpose or accident. I assure you Hijikata-san, I have no intention of going beyond the bounds of my services to you and your group. Anything you believe is none of my concern likely is until it must. Do you agree?"

"I do and I'll hold you to it."

"As will I, just as I'll hold you to get some proper sleep tonight. Keep this up and I may have to prescribe you a sleeping draft." The young woman stated as she moved on to another pile of notes sent to her by Yamazaki. As Hijikata turned to leave though, she added. "I also expect you to assist with dinner tonight so don't be late."

Flustered, he stared at her as if she'd said something insane. "Y-you expect me to-?"

"Must I repeat everything? Shame on you Hijikata-san! Now out with you! And leave the door open, for I may still receive patients." Chizuru stated casually, her face a mask of calm amusement as the man let out a huff, grumbled as he turned on his heel and stormed out of the room as if he'd been insulted. Only when his footsteps had faded away did she start to let her laughter through.

Saito couldn't wrap his mind around just what might be wrong with him. Normally being left alone for long hours at a time didn't bother him, much like everything else that was 'normal' about the rest of the world. But as he lay alone in his room for the third day, Saito couldn't help but feel a pang of something unfamiliar. Naturally his friends had appeared to visit him whenever he was actually conscious to greet them, mostly for meals and he had plenty of books and even his calligraphy to keep him busy. Yet, the feeling persisted. Thanks to finally being back on a soft bed and no long hours in a rickety wagon to make his condition worse, his body was feeling less sore and more like its fine-tuned self. He still couldn't lift his left arm that well and his side stabbed him with pain on occasion but thankfully his meds were keeping it at bay. It still didn't answer why he felt the way he did as he found he'd read the same paragraph three times already, forcing him to fold the book shut. Letting out a sigh of defeat, knowing his mind was wandering on him, Saito managed to stand up with little consequence and with every intent of stretching his legs. Finding a dark blue haori to cover his sleeping yukata, Saito opened the door to reveal the bit of foliage and pond near his room. Like in Edo, the slight chill of the air and the subtle arrival of autumn's colors in the nearby trees and brush. Even the grass looked like it was on edge of giving way to colder climes.

Taking it all in with his usual detached mindset, Saito hung a left and headed for the main section of the garden, using the large stones that made up the path though they bit softly at his bare feet. In hind sight, it felt good to be walking around again and without someone to help him get from one spot to another. He was able to get to one of the stone benches before needing to sit down, his side protesting against the lung fighting to expand beneath it. Once seated and overlooking the serene garden surrounding him, Saito let the peace and order of it all wash over him like an ocean wave. And if for just the moment, he forgot the odd feeling that'd plagued him all day, content to sit and bask in the serenity the garden provided. How long he sat there, he was unsure but he remained lost in his reverie until he heard a shout come from the direction of his room, making him jump and turn, a very uncharacteristic reaction for him. Turning to see the source of the noise, Saito felt a jab of shock to see Chizuru standing by his door, looking in to see it empty with his dinner tray in hand. Glancing at the sky, Saito felt another jolt, this time of surprise to find the sun had nearly left the sky. Had it not been higher when he'd stepped outside? He knew it had been since he distinctly remembered having lunch, his medicine and a small nap before waking to read one of his books. Looking back at his door, Saito watched with curiosity as the girl moved about frantically in search of him. From somewhere, his fellow captain Harada had come running, only to find Chizuru distressed as he urgently asked her what was wrong. As he watched their interaction, Saito couldn't figure out why neither of them had seen him yet only for the answer to be right in front of him: their view of him was blocked by a large rock and an adjoining tree just far away enough for him to see around but close enough to hide him from view. Knowing Chizuru's panic was his fault, Saito moved to get up only for his side to stab him with a sharp feeling of pain likely from staying still for so long.

Clutching at the wound in silent agony, not about to cry out for someone to help him, Saito only hoped someone would just spot him and take initiative. The cool grass under his bare feet made him further regret his little jaunt outdoors, the hard stone of the bench, though smooth was only making his situation worse. Off to the side, on the wooden walkway, he heard someone practically shout "There he is!" which in turn made him pretend to gaze at the pond as if it had mesmerized him.

"Saito-san!" Chizuru's voice cried out as she practically ran down the stone path, followed by Harada and, surprisingly, Hijikata who'd been the one to call out where he was from a ways down on the walkway. And from Chizuru's voice, she was both relieved and angered.

"Saito you fool! Scaring a young woman like that? What were you thinking?" Harada grit out in his own irritation, golden yellow eyes flashing with concern at how the seated warrior was holding himself.

Calm as ever, eyes of jewel blue looking between the three before him with regret. "I wanted to get some fresh air."

"Fresh air or not you shouldn't wander around like this! What if you'd collapsed and we couldn't find you?" Chizuru admonished in a scathing tone. Relief had given way to anger.

Saito let his gaze fall on her, his hand clutching at the cloth of his yukata as another lance of pain shot through him. "I'm sorry."

Letting out an irritated sigh, Chizuru put her hands on her hips. "Enough of that. If you two could get him back to the room, he needs to eat dinner and take his medication." Stepping back to give the two men room, Saito let each man take an arm to lift him off the bench, Chizuru standing by growling. "Honestly, any longer and you would've caught a cold!"

"I said I was sorry." Saito returned in his usual cool tone, hinted vaguely by his pain.

Turning around to lead the way, Chizuru all but stomped ahead as she continued to rant in her boiling ire. "That still doesn't change the fact you did something foolish. Next I may have to chain you to the wall!"

"Isn't that a bit much Chizuru-chan? He just wanted to go outside for a minute." Harada asked as the three stepped up onto the smooth wood after the girl, who had come to stop by Saito's door as they slowly followed.

Her normally kind hazel brown eyes were hard as stone as she stared the three down, making them stare in shock. "And I suppose that will give any other patient I have the support to escape from their beds before they're meant to? To wander off only to harm themselves further to the point of self destruction? Is that what you're telling me Harada-san?"

"Uh... no Iâm" Harada barely managed before she was going again.

"Then perhaps next you're injured, heavens above forbid, I should just kick you out and force you back into the field though your condition threatens to make you bleed to death?" she asked, only earning silence in return. Satisfied she'd gotten her point across, Chizuru pointed into the room and at the bed that Saito had abruptly abandoned. "I thought not. Now if you'd put him back in bed."

Only Harada was able to speak, his voice low as the three warriors had been cowed on the matter. "Yes ma'am."

With their help, Saito was back under the covers but only to his waist as he remained sitting up as his dinner tray was moved to its usual spot by the bed. Hands once again on her hips, Chizuru was giving him a stern look. "Now, Saito-san I expect to come back and find this tray empty and the medicine gone." When he nodded, knowing that words were useless, Chizuru turned to the two men making good their escape. "As for you two, you're both coming with me to the kitchen."

Stopping, knowing they were caught, Hijikata was the first to speak this time and with the same displeasure he seemed to always show her. "What? Why?"

"I need help with the dishes and you two are going to help." Chizuru stated simply, walking casually out of the room, shutting the doors

and began to walk down the wooden path towards the far end of the mansion.

Astonished, Hijikata stomped after her with Harada not far behind, hoping to keep things from getting out of hand. "Why me? I didn't-!"

"Appear to help make dinner, much less eat it though it was brought to your room. I know because I brought it to you and you were doing paperwork. The whole time."

She got me! "That still doesn't-." He began, only to be cut off.

Chizuru's response was swift as it was accurate. "What? Give me the right to order you about?" taking advantage of the vice-captain's flustered look, she pressed on, pointing her small but deceptively strong finger at him. "That's fine up until I have no choice but to, as this unit's physician, order you to do as you're told. And what I have to say is this: you will eat your dinner, you will help with the dishes, you will get some sleep and tomorrow you will help make dinner with me and another volunteer."

"What about me?" Harada dared to ask, astonished to see his vice-captain struck into silence after losing a verbal war with a young woman who'd only been there less than a week.

Her response to his question was softened but didn't lack any bite. "You've been drafted. Unless you'd like to be cleaning this entire mansion... by yourself all night?"

The thought of doing that much work, nighttime or not, made Harada turn an off color before quickly nodding in agreement. "Washing dishes sounds good."

"Good! Now let's go. They aren't going to wash themselves." The young woman said, humble in her triumph as she turned again to lead the way, knowing the two men would follow even though she couldn't physically stop them from running away. It still didn't stop her from smiling almost like a fool as they headed for the kitchens.

Hearing the trio leave him to his devices, their conversation fading as they got further away, Saito could tell from Chizuru's voice she was giving his comrades a verbal dressing down for their own failures. _Is that was a woman's wrath is like?_ He wondered as he obediently dug into his meal which had yet to go cold. This incident would be the second time he'd seen the young woman's fury rise to the surface, dangerously close to getting past her kindness and strength like a beast only barely held in a cage of emotional restraint. Only this time she'd turned this ire at him, if only for a moment. Just that brief glance told him that what they experienced was but a taste of the extent of the girl's potential temper. Looking back on it now, it was quite possibly the same defiance she'd shown the two thugs that'd broken into her house. His ever strengthening condition allowed him to eat the entire dinner, as Chizuru had ordered before he moved on to the medicine, ever bitter and washed down with the last of his tea. Though he thought about taking the tray to the door and leaving it there for the girl to find, he quickly decided against it, knowing she'd probably get upset he'd gotten out of bed again. Knowing the young woman would return eventually, Saito didn't see the

point to staying awake until she came back, settling into the bed and falling easily into sleep.

Standing in the kitchen adjoining the captain's quarters, Hijikata was obediently but begrudgingly standing next to his fellow captain Harada as the two men washed dish after dish that'd been sent their way to clean. Moving around the rest of the space like a hummingbird going from flower to flower, Chizuru went from spot to spot, station to station, cleaning, sorting and putting away stray equipment and food. And when they started to pile up she would come to dry the dishes they finished, stacking and putting them back in the cupboards where they lived before coming back for the next batch. Both men watched her do this out of the corner of their eyes, silently impressed at the girl's speed and prowess. Even as she carried more than was safe the young woman still maintained an almost unnatural grace as she worked. Though she appeared sweating and tired, it didn't keep her from finishing her tasks before another needed her attention. She left only once to go retrieve Saito's dinner tray, all satisfied that all the food was gone as Chizuru had instructed. All three kept this up for close to two hours before they finally finished, giving every surface a final wipe-down before calling it a night. As they exited the kitchen to head for their own rooms, Chizuru gave the two men a kind smile. "Thank you both for your help. And thankfully cleaning the rest of the mansion can wait until tomorrow."

"Glad to be of help Chizuru-chan. Rest up okay?" Harada said politely, smiling in turn.

Chizuru returned the smile as she nodded. "Yes thank you Harada-san and you too." Hazel brown eyes cut into him with their usual deceptive accuracy. "Do try to get some proper sleep Hijikata-san. I'd have to resort to putting sleeping drafts in your food. Good night!"

Watching the girl walk away, giving the vice-captain no chance to respond, Harada chuckled and nudged his superior playfully. "She got you there Hijikata. Maybe you should listen to the lady for once."

"Oh shut up." Hijikata snarled at him, careful to keep his voice low lest anyone nearby heard them bickering.

From more than halfway across the walkway, Chizuru called back casually. "I heard that!"

"How did-?" the vice-captain sputtered, staring at the receding girl's form in shock.

"Well it is pretty quiet out here." Harada reasoned before turning to head for his room some distance away. Silently fuming and annoyed, Hijikata finally did the same, though a bit more rushed in his anger but quietly so not to disturb anyone. Once in his room that also served as his office, he spied the paperwork from earlier he never got to finish. He knew he had to finish the report that sat at the top of the pile while the information was still fresh and moved to settle at the spot. Just as he was about to pick up the brush and wet it with fresh ink, a voice from behind him made him jump. "Hijikata-san."

"Yukimura! What the hell are you doing?" he snarled angrily, mentally slapping himself for leaving the door open and not hearing her approach.

Standing in plain view was Chizuru, her hazel eyes hard as stone as she glowered her annoyance at him. "Making sure you go to bed. And also, your door was still open."

Face red and fuming, Hijikata fought to keep his words civil and his voice low. "That still gives you no right to come in here. You shouldn't even be here! You should be in Edo, living out the rest of your life there, not sneaking into other people's rooms."

"I'm not sneaking. To sneak would mean no one notices me. But you have, mostly because I made sure you did. And just in time you intended to abuse yourself further." She retorted easily, walking further into the room and into his space, not seeming all that bothered that he was bigger and stronger. Though he didn't have his sword, which was by the desk, he'd still be able to overpower her somehow.

Irrked at both her intrusion and her words, Hijikata continued to follow his line of argument despite her words, not willing to be outdone but a young woman who was practically still a child. "I have work to do, and no time to waste explaining myself to a girl overstepping her bounds. Bounds she agreed to stay within and never cross."

This made Chizuru blink in surprise, causing her ire to flare to a new level in both her eyes and her face before coming into her voice. "Overstepping? Oh no, I'm not overstepping, I'm still within my rights." Before he knew it, a small delicate finger was close to stabbing him in the nose, making the captain back up as the girl continued scolding him. "Matter of fact, I came here out of concern for your health and from your reaction, I was right. Any more of this and you'll ruin yourself."

"What?" Hijikata found himself asking, astonished by both her words and her sudden movement.

But Chizuru wasn't backing down. "Deny it all you want but the truth is clear: paperwork and other such duties will always be there no matter the hour. They will wait, sleep can't. By denying sleep, you hinder yourself and thus put not just yourself but others at risk. How will your fellow warriors fare if you start passing out in the midst of battle because you can't stay awake?"

"That still doesn't-." He tried to say, only to get cut off.

"Enough excuses! How or why your fellow captains have let this go on I've no idea but it ends now. At least your original medical officer Yamazaki gave me a clear picture of how badly you treat yourself."

A blush of rage stained his face at the mention of his subordinate's name, making Hijikata fume. "Yamazaki? That-."

Chizuru once again beat him to it. "Don't blame him or me, just yourself. He told me all I needed to get a proper diagnosis on everyone in this mansion and I'm telling you this foolishness ends now." Before he could stop her, Chizuru was suddenly stepping past

him and down towards his desk, practically monkey snatching up the papers he'd been about to work on. As quickly as she'd moved, she was just as swiftly out of his reach, neatly stuffing the papers into a pocket.

Enraged by her act, Hijikata nearly lost himself as he growled at her. "Give those back! They aren't yours!"

This only earned him another glare in return, hazel brown eyes hard and unyielding, still confidently staring him down as she spoke. "Says the man who treats me like a child! Says the man who is now acting like one! If you'll not listen I'll make you: this abuse cannot go on. Either you go to sleep by your own volition or I make you. If not me, then I can easily obtain help. We both know this. So?"

Staring at the girl as if she were mad, Hijikata quickly went over his options. He wasn't about to jump her to get the papers back or command her to lest his voice get too loud and draw attention. And just what she might do to make him go to sleep when he clearly didn't want to was something he didn't wish to dwell on. Officially cornered, he glared as he let his body relax in defeat. "I have no other choices?"

Confident still but unsmiling, Chizuru shook her head. "None. And even if you refuse, you'll not get these back until the morning when your mind isn't fogged by sleep. If not, at the very least, you'll be less irritable. Would that not suit you better?"

"Fine, I give in. Just make sure nothing happens to those reports. I still need to fill them out and give them to Kondo-san." Hijikata warned, still glaring angrily as the girl stepped back onto the wooden walkway just outside his door and into the darkness of night.

"Of course." The young woman finally said, this time with kindness coupled with a smile and nod. "Good night Hijikata-san."

Sliding the door shut behind her, footsteps softly receding, Hijikata let out a sigh of defeated frustration before turning to change into his night clothes. All the while he wondered how a girl not five years his junior not only snuck up on him but managed to get the drop on him, able to steal his things even when he was standing right there. He thought about getting back up to chase her down and take the papers back but what if the ruckus attracted attention? If he was caught, he'd have almost no way of explaining what the girl had done without being seen as a potential molester or his act seen in some way as assault. Letting out another sigh, Hijikata settled into bed as he had be outright ordered, finding that he was more tired than he'd imagined he was. Within moments Hijikata was in the vests of sleep, only vaguely reminding himself to thank Chizuru in the morning.

Breakfast, as always, was a spirited event. Though Saito still couldn't join them, Chizuru joined them instead out of courtesy and by request of said captains, that didn't stop the rest of the captains from being their quirky selves. As proven when, once again, Shinpachi set out to stealing Heisuke's food which in turn started their daily argument over it and who needed the food more. For the past few days, Chizuru had watched this display of brotherly fighting

with confused amusement and decided to take it in stride. Today however, was high time someone put their foot down. The arguing pair unaware of her movements, the rest of the men watched with curious gazes as Chizuru got up rather casually, while pulling what looked like a folded up paper fan from a pocket. Before anyone could stop her, she was standing behind the quarreling pair, bringing the paper fan down on their heads with a swift _whap! Whap!_ And taking everyone else in the room by surprise. Holding their heads in pain, the pair of men were about to protest to the abuse until they saw not just who had struck them, but the stern on her face as she stared them down.

Her tone just made every man in the room blanch when she spoke. "I don't know how long this behavior has been going on but it's gone on long enough. Shinpachi-san."

"Y-yes?" the man asked, holding his head but looking properly scared of the girl standing over him. Never in his life did he believe the young woman could look so dangerous.

Hazel brown eyes bore into him, planting him to the spot. "Not only are you a full grown man but picking on someone who's less than half your size is unacceptable. What's more, stealing your comrade's food because you require it more than him is also unacceptable." She stated calm but grimly before turning her attention to the young man beside her previous target. "Heisuke-kun."

Jumping slightly at becoming the focus of her attention, Heisuke also wisely answered as politely as he could. "Yes Chizuru-chan?"

"By reacting in anger, even if this whole affair is in jest, only makes the issue worse. If you or Shinpachi-san require a second serving, you need but ask and not resolve to thisâ€¦ childish behavior! It's disruptive and unnecessary. And I can think of only one solution to remedy the issue." The usually kind girl practically snarled out. In a flash her gaze went from the two men before her to the commander seated at the end of the room, her voice ever full of ire and confidence. "Kondo-san."

Said commander felt himself begin to sweat bullets as the young woman's gaze seemed to burn his face, Kondo barely managed to speak in his usual, commanding tone that was shadowed by Chizuru's display of dominance. "Yes Yukimura-san?"

"I've been meaning to speak to you on the state of this mansion and its occupants but this incident has forced my hand."

"I-in what way, Yukimura-san?" he asked, honestly curious. Despite the situation, Kondo really did want to hear the young woman's input though now he regretted giving the girl so much leeway.

Ignoring his discomfort, Chizuru merely kept talking. "This place is filthy, close to half of your men sick, injured or struggling to maintain any level of cleanliness to the point of being substandard. Worse still, every man in this unit overall have yet to receive a proper health exam. Your food and medical supplies aren't even properly organized and stocked and from what I've observed, have not been in nearly two years. All in all, this entire facility is one sneeze, fall or cut away from potential collapse!"

"Well it couldn't possibly be that badâ€¦|." Kondo began.

His response was cut off with a harsh rebuttal of her own, causing a flush of red to cross the young woman's face in her fury. "Denial will solve nothing! Say what you like about doing well on your own before my arrival but the signs are clear: this entire compound and its occupants need a once-over that can't be delayed much longer. And the last thing even I want is to do such things during winter. Don't you agree Kondo-san?"

"Yes, I see your point. And you suggest doing this soon?" Kondo managed to say, taking into account every word. It was true that in their few years of existence, they'd only done so much to ensure all was well inside their ranks than inside their compound. Every chance they had to do something about it was lost when work or unrest came up as an excuse.

The question calmed her, allowing a wave of ease to spread. "Within the next few days while the weather is kind, yes. Else we'll just ruin ourselves getting it done during winter or waiting for any rain or snow to let up to let us work."

"Well, well Sannan-san. We have you look for a doctor and you bring back a taskmaster! It seems little Chizuru-san isn't all that she appears!" Souji cut through the tension with a wry laugh, having been watching the whole thing with his usual lazy amusement. It was always fun when Shinpachi and Heisuke fought but this? This was entertainment!

His words only made him a target as Chizuru's gaze fell on the former child prodigy, freezing his carefree expression cold. "I could say the same of you Okita-san, and for that you, Heisuke-kun and Shinpachi-san have been drafted."

The casual smirk gone, Souji gave the young girl a hard glare of his own as he asked. "Drafted? For what?"

"Helping clean the mansion, along with any other soldier or captain willing to pitch in who isn't already sick, injured or reserved for the Shinsengumi's patrol duties. And no, office work doesn't count as an excuse. Especially Shinpachi-san since his injury is minor and won't keep him from working a broom or a rag."

In seconds the smirk was back, though his eyes remained hard in defiance. "Oh-ho! A tough taskmaster at that! But I know when I'm beat. Alright Chizuru-chan, I'll help out."

"I should certainly hope so. After all, sheets can't wash themselves." Chizuru stated casually, her ire appeased for the moment as her paper fan vanished and she sat back down at her seat pillow. Picking up her tea mug to take a sip, she glanced at the men still staring at her as if she were a tiger about to strike at them. Scowling again, the young woman was quick to admonish them. "Why are you staring? Eat and quickly before it gets cold! Some of you have patrol in close to an hour! This city can't protect itself!"

The spell broken, the captains felt foolish at being ordered about by a girl younger than them when they were the ones in charge and she was the temporary guest. As they finished their meals and left for their own work, they each gazed at their latest charge with a curious

eye. In spite of her outburst, the young woman was acting as though nothing had occurred, having finished her own breakfast and was already cleaning up everyone else's. Chattering amongst themselves, Hijikata being one of the last to leave, found his name being called from within the room. "Hijikata-san."

A bit surprised but not about to ignore the young woman, he paused to turn and face her, his purple eyes watching her intently.
"Yes?"

"You'll need this." Chizuru stated, pulling some folded papers from another pocket, watching him approach to take them and unfold them.

Upon seeing what was written, Hijikata recognized the papers immediately. "My reports? You're giving them back?"

Chizuru nodded with a kind smile. "As a reward for following my instructions, which has satisfied me greatly. And if you wish to avoid losing them, I suggest you continue to sleep regularly. Though I'm new here, I'll not see my protectors hobbling themselves because their pride demands more than their bodies can give. Next I may have to give you sleeping drafts and report you to Kondo-san. Now off with you, we both have work to do and only so much time to do it."

Hijikata couldn't help but stare for a moment, a little stunned. Even though they were speaking with friendliness, she was still using her newfound position against him. In the end he merely smiled, stuffing the papers neatly into his own pocket before turning to leave again. "I see. Then I'll be getting these out of the way first. Thank you! Chizuru-san."

"You're most welcome Hijikata-san." Chizuru said in turn before returning to her task at hand, smiling softly in her triumph as the captain left the room.

Wow that was something huh? Not only putting her foot down, but getting respect in the process? Could I out due myself much more? I guess we'll find out next in:

Next:

Chapter 4: Shadows of the Past

Chizuru has been settling into the company of the Shinsengumi, and they've been making room for her in their lives as best they can, though for how long neither can guess. But soon things will get tense as the demonic eyes of Chikage Kazama fall on Kyoto, searching for his lost prize. Who exactly is Kazama and what does he want from Chizuru? And just how far is he willing to go to get her? Find out when '_Tears of the Demon_' returns with:

**Chapter 4: Shadows of the Past!**

4. Chapter 4: Shadows of the Past

Hey everybody! And welcome back to another chapter of '_Tears of the Demon_' as I keep this ball rolling with a light heart. I'm so glad

that this story is being greeted with such love and praise I have to keep going. Once again, I don't own '_HSK_' but I'd love to get them on DVD someday. Enjoy!

"Iii" = speech

Iii = thought

Chapter 4: Shadows of the Past

Close to four days after Chizuru's lecture, the entire Shinsengumi compound was abuzz with activity as entire units of soldiers washed, dusted, swept and cleaned their headquarters from top to bottom, end to end. In the interim both Chizuru and Yamazaki were performing physicals to find and catalogue the true extent of illness and injury amongst the men. Yamazaki, a young man a few inches taller than Chizuru was a soft spoken, kind man with short spiky hair and a long tail in the back, his eyes as purple as Hijikata's though the two weren't related. In spite of knowing her fellow medic for close to two weeks, Chizuru had a good relationship with the man, the two easily conferring with each other on medicines and various treatments. Once all it was all said and done, nearly every man in the compound took a breath of relief as their taskmistress nodded her approval at their work and allowed everyone to return to their regular duties save those too injured or sick. Also another relief was seeing Saito around the mansion grounds again, this time in much better condition though his use of his left arm was still limited by the residual pain in his side. It didn't matter to anyone, only that their spirits were raised seeing him walking and healthy, especially the other captains at meals.

Once he'd taken his place among them, silently thankful to be back on his daily routine, Heisuke was the first to voice his fellow captains' feelings. "You had us really worried Saito-san! Are you sure you're up to moving about like this? Chizuru-chan had a fit last time didn't she?"

Giving the younger captain a steady look, Saito nodded at him. "It's fine. I've assured her I can move on my own though I must still limit myself. Until I'm fully healed, I have been restricted to the mansion grounds."

"True, true. Can't have you walkin' around only to collapse somewhere, possibly where we can't find you or worse. Right Kondo-san?" Shinpachi said in turn, looking to their head captain as the man smiled warmly at them all.

"He's right. As talented as you are, it would be bad form of us to make you take on your duties too soon. What's more, I have every right to think Yukimura-chan would have my head!"

"Have whose head?" Chizuru asked as she came into the room with breakfast trays in hand, followed by Harada who'd volunteered to help.

Jumping slightly at her question, Kondo poorly tried not to look nervous, shaking his head with an uneasy smile. "Nothing, nothing! That smells good Yukimura-chan! You never cease to impress."

Amused by his reaction, Chizuru merely smiled prior to resuming her

task, making sure everyone had their equal share. "Such is my intention, at least until I reach my skill limit. One can only improve so well in any skill."

"Hmm wise words. Well, thanks for the food!" Kondo exclaimed happily as he took a large bite of an onigiri, humming in contentment at the taste.

"Eat up, you'll need your strength." Chizuru encouraged them as she took her own spot next to Saito, the last one along the wall. As she settled in she didn't hesitate to turn to her patient with professional kindness. "Saito-san, how is your arm today?"

"Quite well but as you've instructed, I won't be leaving the mansion all week." The purple haired warrior informed her between bites, using his right since using his left too much left him sore and his wound would sometimes protest in turn.

Accepting his answer, Chizuru nodded as she turned to her own meal as well. "Good, you need to stay where both Yamazaki-san and I can keep an eye on you. You haven't been teased on this fact have you?"

"No, everyone is been quite understanding." Saito returned in his usual, polite manner.

Smiling widely Chizuru looked honestly pleased, pausing only to pull a small envelope from a pocket in her sleeve. "I'm glad. But I do have some medicine prepared should you be feeling any unusual amounts of pain."

"Thank you." He said, accepting the envelope before putting it away in a pocket of his own, noting that his daily medicine was already on his tray.

"Of course!" was her happy reply, both returning to their food.

From Saito's right, Shinpachi leaned forward a little to look at the younger woman better as he spoke, smiling widely. "Say, can't you just give him that all the time? It could get him back on track faster."

Shocked at his words, Chizuru nearly choked on her tea, making everyone in the room take notice. "Don't even try to propose such a thing! Medicine is a delicate art that varies from person to person. To suggest excessive use of it on a patient, even for the reason you have in mind, could be harmful in the long run! Even the mildest of potions could either damage or ruin the person taking it when they're perfectly healthy. Some even have addictive qualities that can ruin them not only in body but in mind. And even if Saito-san wasn't my patient, I'd still advise against such hasty action." Glowering at him with disapproval all over her face, the young woman couldn't help but sound astonished. "Honestly Shinpachi-san, such a path only leads to pain and death which the opposite of my intent."

"It was just a suggestionâ€¦" the larger warrior managed, looking rightfully sheepish.

Chizuru's expression slackened by only a fraction but didn't vanish. "True but it's still a slippery slope. To abuse these things in this way is more than just damaging, it's almost inescapable. I'm

surprised most physicians aren't attacked for most of their stores and the fleeting effects they provide."

"You're right. I'm sorry Chizuru-chan." Shinpachi mumbled, appearing disappointed in himself for not considering such things before. Around the room the rest of the captains only looked at each other.

Finally Chizuru relaxed, shaking her head at him. "No, it's fine. Just eat your breakfast, preferably without stealing Heisuke-kun's." Hazel brown eyes snapped to fall on the smaller captain already attempting to steal some of Shinpachi's meat. "Or him from you."

"Dammit, caught me." The young man bit out as he backed off, earning a triumphant chuckle from his larger rival as well as a playful shove. Chizuru's sharp eyes kept them from starting an impromptu shoving match.

Saito listened to the interaction with silent interest, amazed at what an impact the young woman had on his comrades. At his own spot, Sannan was smiling good naturedly at it all while Hijikata was smirking. Smirking! Okita, in his usual bemused mood, only looked on with a sly look of his own. Harada was trying hard not to laugh at his comrades looking so dejected at being scolded over their daily antics. A rare silence had fallen over the room as they continued to eat, Saito eating his own at a steady pace before getting to the medicine Chizuru had given to him only moments before. This particular batch was bitter like always but this time with a slightly foul smell that made him cringe, enduring it only to further ensure his return to health. It went down easily thanks to his tea, the brew distracting him from both its taste and smell long enough to consume all of it. From the side, he could sense Chizuru's gaze on him, making him glance only to see she was focused on her own meal. Had he imagined it? It didn't matter as they all finished their meals and left to start their day, leaving Chizuru to clean up after them and Saito to help her if she needed it. As per her suggestion, the captain was to perform light tasks until he was fit for other duties as well as patrols. Until then, he was confined to his room or the grounds either for light labor or paperwork. At any other time Saito would've protested but his condition back at Chizuru's house in Edo proved that rushing things might make things worse and not just for himself.

Following the young woman back to the kitchen, Saito put the trays where she bid, nodded politely at her thanks and found himself released to do as he wanted. Not wishing to crowd the young woman, Saito decided to head back to his room to go over what amount of paperwork others had no choice to do for him in his absence. As it turned out, his own unit had been worried about him and in turn were happy to see him on his feet again, asking about his health and any tips they could get on avoiding the same mistake. Ever honest, Saito then informed them it wasn't just a mistake, but a near fatal error of taking on deceptively lesser enemies that showed their true skill when he was almost too tired to defend himself. Of course his men cried their outrage at such tactics, saying the men who'd attacked their captain were cowards no matter how talented they were. Saito said nothing to this as he felt the same but did tell his soldiers that working to strengthen their stamina could help avoid the very problem he'd faced as well as sharpen their sword skills. Taking his words to heart, his men thanked him before he bid them goodbye to

continue on to his room to handle any paperwork awaiting him there. Along the way, he saw Souji waiting by his door. And if the ever present smirk was to go by, the former child prodigy was up to no good.

Coming to a stop just before the prodigy, Saito gave his fellow captain a curious stare as he asked. "Okita-san. Did you need something?"

Smirk stretching into a smile, Souji looked the man in the eye. "Indeed I did Saito-san. I need to know what the men who attacked you and Sannan-san looked like."

"For what reason?" Saito inquired, puzzled by the statement, unsure on why it mattered.

Souji chuckled but didn't beat around the bush, knowing his friend preferred the straightforward version of things. "Well, I have been asked to take Chizuru-chan to the market to gather supplies and I need to know about those men from Edo."

As his friend spoke, Saito nodded in acceptance before he scowled lightly in confusion again. "You think they may have followed us?"

Expression turning serious for once, Souji nodded with a stern frown. "As you and Sannan-san told us, they were quite persistent in their pursuit of you so if they did follow you here, I need to know what to look for."

Saito nodded once more, but hesitated on speaking. No matter how much he tried, his memories of Edo were foggy at best before waking up in Chizuru's house. Everything after that was a mixture of fatigue and disorienting pain from his injuries and the constant motion of the wagon they'd ridden in to get back to Kyoto. Still, Saito answered as honestly as he could, knowing his friend would understand. "Much of the encounter is blurry due to my injury but I can say that they appeared average but their skills with the sword were on par with mine and yours. I'm unsure of how this is so but they could be ronin of considerable skill. Why they're not sworn to a lord is unknown to me, much like their intentions. Sannan-san and Chizuru-san may be able to help you better."

Listening closely, Souji nodded with a thoughtful expression, knowing the man before him wouldn't lie about such things. "Hmm well as I said I needed to know but thanks anyway Saito-san."

"Of course. Good luck out there." Saito told him as the carefree man began to walk away.

"Why thank you!" the warrior responded almost jovially, smiling broadly again as he waved goodbye before vanishing around the building's corner. "Bye!"

Strange as ever. Saito thought absently to himself as he went on his way into his room before settling at his desk, glad to see someone had begun to send him the usual reports and other works he usually did. Preparing both ink and brush, Saito read each page quickly and thoroughly before making his own marks on the pages before setting them aside to dry as he moved on to the next one in

the pile. As per Chizuru's suggestions, he didn't strain his left arm all that much, taking breaks as often as he dared when the limb began to ache or his side started its own protests at his actions. But still he worked, hoping that Chizuru's supply run would go smoothly and not just for Souji's sake.

Of all the captains, Souji Okita had spent the least amount of time with their new ward and medic Chizuru, following the girl leisurely with his hands behind his head as he trailed behind her at a respectful distance. Far enough to not crowd her but close enough to be the protective warrior he was supposed to be, his carefree expression hiding his cunning gaze well just as much as his smile kept those nearby from suspecting his scrutiny of them. Ahead of him, Chizuru was walking just as casually but more focused on the different food vendors than her guard, her male attire doing well to hide her true status even when her delicate fingers and soft face could easily give her away. Still this didn't deter her from performing her duties, expertly finding various meats and vegetables still in their prime despite the time of day. Souji had honestly been surprised that the girl had a sword, much less a wakizashi at that, which appeared to be in good condition and didn't appear to be well used. It almost seemed to Souji that the sword was a fake, at least until he saw how the young woman handled the thing. Not only did she place it with expert hands, but she seemed accustomed to the weight and size of it.

So the usually chatty warrior didn't comment and let the girl go about her business, taking the things that were too heavy for her to carry, even giving his opinion on sides of meat still available for sale. Yet all the while his constant surveillance of the crowd didn't let up, taking in every man who may be carrying or concealing a sword. Much to his relief, his search had turned up nothing. Up in the sky, the sun was close to reaching its apex, the early autumn chill barely fighting against the mighty star's heat as the pair began their trek back to the mansion headquarters with bags full of food. Or at least that was the plan until Chizuru ever so casually took a corner leading away from their destination and towards the docks. Confused but not wanting to give himself away he called to her softly. "Oi, Chizuru! Why are we going this way? It's the other way!"

Not turning around but looking back at him Chizuru spoke with a light tone, just loud enough for him to hear over the city noise. "A man has been tailing us since the market. I recognize him as one of the men that tried to attack us at my house. We must ensure he's alone and what he intends."

"Are you sure it's him? It could just be a man who looks like him." Souji asked, kicking himself for not noticing, knowing better than to look back and confirm. That would give them away and their quarry a chance to run off before they could catch him.

Ahead of him Chizuru merely nodded, what he could see of her face hard set with obvious certainty. "No, I'm certain. He would've hurt me had Saito-san not stopped him. I don't know why but he's followed us here. Now we must find out why."

Souji couldn't help but chuckle. _This girl's got spunk, I'll give her that._ "You're a regular tactician you know that?"

Chizuru only shrugged. "I only state what must be done, little else. Let's lead him further before striking, prove that he's by himself. His interest is me so I can be the decoy."

"What? No I can't allow that!" the warrior captain bit out in sudden annoyance. Like hell he was about to endanger his charge, volunteer or not.

But the girl just glared at him. "You must if you're to take him by surprise. He knows nothing of you but if he sees I'm alone, he will try to attack. And should I succeed where you fail, we will prevail regardless." She said, using a free hand to touch her short sword at her hip, looking at the man with a steely look in her eyes. "I'm not as helpless as I seem Okita-san. Please trust me on this."

Souji frowned as he considered his options, which weren't great in numbers. It was unlikely they'd see the man again and knowing what they were up against would help in the long run. Finally Souji let out a sigh of defeat, his normally impish green eyes hard like stone. "All right but the others will kill me if you get hurt."

"An issue for later. I will continue on while you hide. If you wish to assure yourself of my safety, only strike before he does." Chizuru informed him, smiling at his indirect agreement to her plan.

"As milady commands." Souji confirmed in mock nobility, his grin an icy shadow of the intended expression.

Chizuru took his shift in mood in stride, pausing at the corner to face him properly, putting a mask of friendly joy on her face. "This street connects with the next through another lane while I lead him down this one. Act as if we were only shopping together as friends and must go our own ways. Once he's sure I'm alone, he will come for me. I will trust you to be there in time before he does me harm."

Looking past her towards the alley, the captain didn't like how long the path was but knew he had to be quick to do this properly. After a few seconds Souji put on a fake smile of his own before speaking in case the man was closer than he thought. "Right. See you around then."

Giving each other a friendly wave, Souji continued down the road as instructed while Chizuru took the corner down the alley leading away. Though his demeanor was lazy and inattentive, Souji was inwardly screaming to turn around and make sure the man was really there and not moving too quickly after the girl, he kept the illusion up as long as the next corner before finally looking back just as he was turning the next corner himself. He felt a jolt of surprise to find that Chizuru was indeed right, that a man had been following them, a man he'd seen but had disregarded as just another random face. Leaning against the stone wall of a nearby house, the man was dressed in mostly green, his hakama a darker shade and looking a bit worn though his top didn't look much better. Like most warriors his dark hair was in a topknot while some of it lazily framed his expression of predatory concentration. If this man had a master of any kind, then his master paid well enough for the man to follow a girl he didn't know halfway across a large island but didn't pay well enough for better attire. Whether it was his choice or not didn't matter to Souji, only that Chizuru had been right and he hadn't been nearly as

observant as he should've been. But now he could make up for it as the man shuffled forward, slowly but surely after the young woman, knowing that running all the way back down would give him away. With bags of food still in hand, Souji nearly ran all the way around to the next corner, looking down to the right to find Chizuru had been right that the paths looped together.

Knowing their quarry wouldn't see or hear him, Souji rushed down to the corner, putting the bags of food down onto the ground where they wouldn't get dirty or trampled and peaked around the edge of the wall. As predicted, Chizuru was walking towards him as calmly and casually as she could, her hazel brown eyes quickly spotting him looking back at her. Though her face was a kind mask for the sake of any passerby, only her eyes gave away the hard resolve beneath her façade. Nodding at her, Souji didn't smile and waited for her and her stalker to get close enough. Without even looking his way Chizuru didn't hesitate to turn onto his street, even going as far as moving behind Souji to stay out of range. Seeing that his target was about to disappear on him, the man shuffled over the wall with the intent of using it as cover. All this did was make it easier for Souji to come around himself, a well aimed fist hitting the surprised man square in the face and felling him to the ground. Rolling on his back, clutching his face the stranger groaned loudly in pain, all of which Souji took no pity on. As roughly as he'd struck him, Souji had him by the shirt and was holding him against the wall, green eyes flaring with annoyance. "Who are you and why were you following this kid?"

A bit stunned the man managed to blubber past his bleeding nose as he stared at his captor in surprise and horror. "Y-you're mistaken! I wasn't followin' him! I thought he was someone else, I swear!"

This only made Souji more irritated, his face twisting into a full-on glare. "I don't believe you. You're under arrest you sick piece of filth."

"No wait! All I was told was to look for a girl with brown hair and eyes! My boss wants her bad for some reason, no idea why! Honest! I'm just a sword for hire! Nobody tells me anything anyways! I just had to be sure he wasn't the girl in disguise." The man in green said desperately, hoping the information would be enough to lighten the other man's grip on him.

But Souji wasn't about to let up that easily, pressing his quarry a little harder against the stone wall behind him. "And just who is your boss? Who else in this city is looking for this girl you speak of?"

"Jin, his name's Jin and he's stayin' over at the Mitsune across town. I get orders from him, not much else. Please let me go!" the man pleaded, looking about to other people for help against his attacker.

No such luck as the locals merely looked on, knowing who Souji was as said warrior only glared harder. "Not likely. I need to be sure you're not lying to me." Turning to a man watching the exchange with mild interest, Souji called out to him in a purely authoritative voice. "You! Get me some rope and send a friend to find a Shinsengumi patrol!"

"R-right away sir!" the local man said, getting up from his bench as he moved to obey the warrior captain.

Seeing the man vanish into the crowds, Souji turned to Chizuru who'd been watching everything from a small distance away. And from her expression, she was processing what the man had told them as well. Keeping up the charade, Souji kept his voice hard. "Get the food and wait over there until this is dealt with."

Chizuru nodded, collecting the bags with a low enough response. "Yes sir." She had to make two trips since both sets were too heavy for her but she didn't complain.

Glaring at his capture, Souji growled at him in his barely contained anger. "As for you, stay still or I'll hit you again."

"Okay, okay!" the man in green blubbered, knowing he was trapped.

They only had to wait fifteen minutes before the patrol can running up, led by Shinpachi and the man Souji had sent to find them. Thanking the man for his help, Shinpachi immediately ordered the man in green be subdued and escorted back to headquarters while he stayed behind to talk to his friends. Once they were out of earshot, Shinpachi's usually happy face was set with a rare grim expression as he looked down at Chizuru. "Are you sure it's one of the men who broke into your house in Edo?"

Chizuru nodded, looking greatly concerned. "I'm positive. He and another man attempted to enter my home, intending harm to Saito-san and Sannan-san. Why only two I don't know but this proves they're working for someone, someone who's an enemy to us all."

"Enemy to us all? What do you mean?" Shinpachi asked, both men looking at the young woman in confusion.

"That man said he was told to look for a girl with my features, by a man who's paying them well enough to give chase halfway across a nation. What's more, they may have been ordered to attack your friends once they reached Edo to keep from finding me. Who is behind this is and why is as much a mystery as it is to you but it's enough proof that there is more going on than even we believe."

"Could be about your father? Getting you to get him out of hiding?" Souji asked, the thought that someone could be after the western doctor just like them was troubling.

Much to their irritation, Chizuru shrugged, giving them a helpless look. "That's a possibility but we won't know until we ask that man's leader when you and your men find him. In the meantime, I need to get all this food to the kitchens before they spoil else your hard earned money goes to waste."

"Right once again Chizuru-chan. C'mon Souji, might as well earn our meals if we want our mistress to keep cooking them." Shinpachi exclaimed as he grabbed for the food bags the girl had been carrying, leaving the other set for his fellow captain.

"But I was carrying them! I had to put them down to take that guy down! Must you be so mean to me Shinpachi-san?" Souji complained

childishly, earning an amused chuckle from Chizuru as his friend laughed at his antics.

"Do you have any shame Souji?"

Fighting down another bout of laughter, Chizuru cut in before they could begin to argue with each other. "Enough, both of you. Or else I won't be able to get anything done today. Not when I have something special planned for you all."

"Wha? A treat from Chizuru-chan? Now that's something to look forward to! Hurry up Souji! I'm not missing out on anything because you decided to be slow!" Shinpachi was nearly shouting as he started down the street towards the headquarters, Chizuru following him at a more casual pace, chuckling at the larger man's reaction.

"Huh? You don't even know what she intends to make! Which I'm sure would help motivate me don't you think?" Souji asked as he moved to pick up the remained food bags, walking a little faster to catch up despite his question.

This only earned him another laugh from the young woman. "But Okita-san! That would be telling! It's a surprise. It has to be if it's going to remain special at this point."

"You're so mean Chizuru-chan!" the prodigy exclaimed indignantly though he smiled at her anyway.

"Only because you make it so easy!" she retorted, her face flushing pink with giggles.

"A taskmaster I tell you. A taskmaster!" Souji all but shouted, but still smiled like a fool as he moved to catch up with the receding pair, all three practically racing each other to get back to the mansion first.

Roughly an hour later and Chizuru was back in her element, thanking Souji and Shinpachi for their help as she got about to making lunch, setting aside the extra ingredients for her surprise later on. Knowing that the Shinsengumi likely had a budget to keep an eye on, Chizuru had worked hard to haggle for everything she needed. She'd even gone as far as using what money she had left to get a hold of the amount of bean paste she needed for her little project for her new protectors. Though she was a little out of practice, Chizuru didn't see the harm in giving her pastry making skills a go since she wanted to have some of the daifuku herself. She'd had daifukumochi at a festival with her father as a child and had loved the taste of them enough to try and make some for her and her father even though she'd little to no idea what she was doing. The tears she'd shed over the batch she'd hopelessly destroyed were only placated by her father's kind words, gentle hands and strong embrace. After that 'incident', the doctor had taken his only child to a bakery to see how the confection was made, even being allowed to make some with her tiny hands. Once they were done, they ate them soon after they got home with tea, the doctor patiently listening to his daughter's excited chattering with a smile she had yet to forget. Knowing the dessert couldn't make itself, Chizuru shook off the effects her distant memory had and got to work. She had an entire compound of men to feed!

"One of the men is here? You're certain?" Sannan found himself asking in surprise, staring at the younger, green eyed captain in shock. At the back of the room, Saito stiffened slightly at the news but said nothing. Already his mind was bringing forth the conversation he'd had with Souji mere hours earlier.

Face stuck in a frown for once, Souji nodded solemnly. "Chizuru identified him as the one of the men who broke into the house, that you had said attacked you and Saito. There's no denying it: somebody is up to no good."

"Yes but who? And why go so far to find us? Not to mention a girl who has nothing to do with any of our affairs." Sannan muttered the last bit, the whole room falling silent as each man knew to what he was referring but wasn't about to voice it.

But Hijikata broke it soon enough, keeping his focus on the situation at hand. "Hard to say but we won't know until we find this Jin person. And our guest said he's at the Mitsune inn across town?"

"I remember that place! It's small but doesn't attract much attention. Guess now we know why." Heisuke stated, rubbing his chin thoughtfully before he shrugged it off.

Once again sitting at the head of the room, Kondo took everything in with a grim look on his face before speaking. "Then it's settled: Toshi-kun! Lead a squad of men to the Mitsune and find this Jin for questioning. I want to know what he's doing here, why he's after Yukimura-san and for whom. If this is connected to Koudou-san, it's important we have as much information as we can get our hands on."

"Right." Hijikata turned back towards the collection of captains, speaking with his usual confident authority. "Harada and Sannan can come with me as support. The rest of you remain here on high alert should any of them appear looking for their friend. We move in an hour."

"Yes sir." They all said collectively before getting up to leave and filing out, giving each other a respective yet friendly distance.

Though being one of the first to exit, Saito waited until Souji came walking out to turn and speak to him. "Okita-san."

Eying his fellow captain with a curious look, his wry smirk already back on his lips, Souji spoke with his usual casualness. "Yes Saito-san?"

Jewel blue eyes, much like the ocean, stared the other captain down as he spoke the words he almost feared speaking. "Was Yukimura-san in danger?"

"Not in the slightest! In fact, Chizuru-chan went out of her way to make sure she never really was in danger. Came up with a plan on how to catch the guy and everything." Souji said confidently, smiling widely as he spoke, giving his fellow captain a knowing look. "You really know how to pick 'em Saito-san."

Saito blinked just prior to scowling his confusion at the man. "That

is not what I meant."

Souji merely chuckled his amusement, taking pleasure in his friend's honest ignorance of things. "Sure it wasn't. Even said she had a special treat planned. It must be good if it's from her given how well she cooks."

"And yet I'm not reassured you're telling me the truth." Saito grumbled, still scowling but with a bit more irritation. In spite of himself, Saito couldn't help but find his friend's reaction annoying.

"What? Why Saito-san! Why would I ever lie to you?" the question only earned him a glare from the stoic warrior, making him laugh. "If you're so worried, why not go and ask her yourself?"

Again Saito blinked his surprise, turning away as his brain already struggled with the thought of speaking to a girl, though practically a stranger he'd sworn to protect. "I should not."

"No! you really should." Souji insisted, his smug grin only adding to Saito's ire.

"Why?" he asked, honestly confused on why his friend was pushing him this way. Just what was the man up to?

Finally Souji let out a sigh of defeat, his expression falling into a frown of pure disappointment. "You really are hopeless sometimes you know that? Just hopeless." Turning on his heel, Souji called back as he walked away. "Go, don't go your choice. Just make up your mind before it slips away from you."

Saito found he had nothing to say to Souji's confusing words, watching his friend walk away in puzzlement, unaware of the other man's knowing smirk. Eventually Saito shrugged it off as something to ponder later, heading back to his room to complete the reports he'd been reading when the meeting had been called. Then, maybe afterwards, he would go see Chizuru. Maybe.

Hijikata confidently walked the streets with his men at his back, knowing that Harada, Sannan and their own units were right behind him. Though a daytime raid of an unknown building and its occupants possibly armed was risky, the vice-captain wasn't about to let a potential kidnapper slip out of his grip. Not when the victim was a harmless young woman only just starting her life and had begun the long, hard trek of getting him and his men on the right path in terms to health and welfare. Even now he could remember the merchant Michio's warning to care for Chizuru as best they could and not make him regret it. Though he knew next to nothing about the old man, knowing that a promise two of his friends had made was almost broken sent sparks of anger through him. Knowing the girl hadn't come to harm thanks to his long time friend Souji helped sooth his anger, but just the fact more attackers remained only made his rage flare higher. There was no way he was going to let these men get away unscathed no matter what they intended. As usual, the local people muttered at their passing, some turning away or shutting their windows while others looked on in awe and curiosity. They all knew their ally, the Aizu clan, probably wasn't going to respond to their request for aid in the matter. Not when in their minds, and his, this was something for the Shinsengumi to deal with, and deal with it

alone.

Purple eyes staring straight ahead with a hard look in their depths, Hijikata eventually spied the sign bearing the characters 'Mitsune' upon it over a humble doorway leading into a large building a few buildings down. Calling for their procession to halt, Hijikata waited patiently for his fellow captains to come forward to confer with him. Even as he approached Sannan was already looking their target over with a critical eye. "It's not very big but hopefully we won't meet much resistance. Any ideas?"

"A few but hopefully it'll minimize casualties and we'll be able to sort the citizens from the criminals. And with you here we'll know who's who." The vice-captain surmised as he eyed the building carefully.

"I see, to make sure we don't arrest the wrong people." Harada said with a nod, knowing that rushing in would be too hasty and they could lose their target to the crowds. "What shall we do then?"

"Harada and his men can cover the back with half of your unit as support while you and I take the remaining force in through the front. With any luck, no one will fight back and we'll just arrest whoever we're looking for. But first, take that off."

Surprised, Sannan looked down at his Shinsengumi haori, marking him as one of their number. "What? Why?"

Taking his confusion in stride, Hijikata merely smiled at his friend. "They may not know you're one of us and just some random citizen who alerted us to their deeds back in Edo when you spotted one of them here which is half true. By having you act as the witness and therefore the victim, we're ensuring they still don't know where Yukimura-san is. What's more, they'll think you and Saito were just a pair of warriors they were ordered to attack at random for no clear reason. If they believe it, they'll think whoever employed them has lied and tell us what we want to know."

"Yes, yes that makes sense! Two of the men can even act as your guards while we question them." Harada added with a laugh.

Liking the thought Hijikata's smile grew wider before turning to a pair of men nearest to them. Beside him, Sannan was already shedding the large haori before giving it to another of their soldiers to hold onto until the operation was over. "Good thinking Harada-san. You two!" he called out, the two moving forward to hear his instructions. "Guard Sannan-san as part of our ploy, the rest must act as if they've only just met him. Remember we must keep this up until we're free from discovery. Understand?"

This earned him a unified collection of affirmations, the two men selected already stepping forward to stand by Sannan as though he were just a temporary charge but didn't look any less alert. The rest, at Harada's instruction, broke off into two halves, on half following him with the other followed Hijikata all the way to the front of the inn. Every man behind him had donned a grim expression that promised misery for any who opposed them as Hijikata stepped inside and openly shouted to the stunned people within. "Attention to all: I'm Toshizo Hijikata of the Shinsengumi seeking a man named Jin and any of his comrades to be arrested for questioning of assault."

Should anyone resist, they will be cut down. Everyone who is not involved should surrender immediately before being released. You shall be free of us once our search is completed. Until then, bear with us."

The concierge at the desk, an old man who still appeared to be in good health couldn't help but gape at the men invading his place of business. "B-b-but sir! Several of my customers are named Jin! How will you know who you seek is even here?"

Hijikata didn't hesitate to stare the man down with a cold expression. "We have a witness who was also a victim to the assault by the suspect and any who travels with him. If the one we seek is indeed not here, we'll know it. Should worse come to worse, we shall try not to cause as much damage as possible." Looking at the men at his back, he called out. "Spread out and search every room! Leave no corner unchecked!"

"Sir!" the warriors responded professionally, moving quickly to invade the small inn as fast as possible, giving customers in the dining area very little time to react. From in the back the sound of a door being slid open let the early afternoon sun into the establishment, revealing that Harada had successfully infiltrated the garden. The spear-wielding warrior stepped inside, his frame nearly taking up the whole space and blocking a majority of the light. Though his golden yellow eyes never wavered in staring with a hard gaze, his body was relaxed as if bored with his task. He looked about to speak when sounds of a struggle broke the silence that'd fallen over the lower floor of the inn, making the captains stare up in confusion. From the upper level, Hijikata could see his men, dressed in their light blue haori with white mountains same as him were bodily struggling with a man dressed in a worn set of dull blue clothes. His face was twisted with seething rage as he fought with his captors, one of them already trying his hands behind his back while another stood by with his swords. They were likely sitting around out of his reach when the soldiers had busted in on him.

With any luck, that's who we're looking for. Hijikata thought as the man continued to struggle before a shove from behind nearly sent him tumbling. As he was forced into the open, the man began to snarl at them. "Untie me! Untie me dammit and let me go! I've done nothing worthy of this abuse."

Hijikata watched the man get dragged down the stairs and onto his knees before him, ignoring his loud cursing. "You are Jin? From Edo?"

The man in blue glared up at him, grey eyes shining with defiance. "And if I am?"

"Then we have a witness who can attest to you and your comrades being part of an unprovoked attack on him and his friend while on journey there. He claims to have seen another of your friends in market, recognizing him as one of the men who attacked him. And if he also identifies you and whoever else is with you, you're under arrest for your deeds."

The man in blue merely scoffed, clearly not believing him. "And if I'm not?"

"Then we let you go and move on to any others who interest us. Is that not a fair trade?"

The man's lip curled in a sneer, angry at being bound and shoved to the floor. It did nothing to hide the hint of fear that went through him. Whether it was due to him being their target or because he'd committed some other offense somewhere Hijikata couldn't tell as the man just snarled at him. "Bring your witness then. If there's any justice in this, then he's a liar."

Hijikata's violet eyes flashed dangerously at the accusation but didn't respond to it, for he had to keep the illusion intact that they were acting on a tip from a citizen and not one of their own ranks. Still he turned his head towards the front door and called out. "Bring the witness forward!"

Like a procession, one of the Shinsengumi soldier's entered first as Sannan and the other soldier walked behind him. As ordered, the two soldiers didn't dare glare at the bound man before them for calling one of their captains a liar. Sannan also kept his displeasure hidden as he walked like any warrior did, only with a bit of hesitation to give the impression of distaste of being in range of his attacker. Spectacles flickered light as he looked at Hijikata as his fellow captain asked with as much authority and indifference as he could. "Sir, is this the man that attacked you and your fellow traveler three weeks ago in the city of Edo?"

Still kneeling on the floor where the soldiers had put him, the man in blue stared at Sannan as if he'd seen a ghost. He was in trouble and he knew it. Giving the man a distinct and thorough once-over, Sannan eventually nodded and declared. "That's him. He led the attack on me and my friend in Edo."

"I understand. Escort the witness out please." Hijikata stated tonelessly, violet eyes falling once again on the stunned man in blue.

"Sir." One of the soldiers turned to Sannan, politely pointing towards the door they'd come in. "This way, sir." Sannan nodded, saying nothing as he obediently followed the soldier back out again, keep their charade intact.

Once they were gone, Hijikata was speaking again, his voice level to hide the triumph he felt over the heartless man before him. "As for you, you're officially under arrest. Are there any others who came with you?"

Knowing he was beaten, the man didn't look the captain in the eye as he spoke. "Several but they're not here."

"We'll see about that." Hijikata bit out, suddenly annoyed before leveling it out again to speak to the man watching from behind the desk. "Innkeeper, can you identify anyone who came in with this man?"

Nodding, the old man tried not to look disappointed to lose a customer even if to the upholders of justice. "Why yes, I can. They were quite distinct seein' as how I'd never seen 'em before. If I can avoid any more trouble, I'll help all I can."

For the first time since entering, Hijikata smiled kindly at the man. "Thank you sir. I shall leave a number of my men here to escort any more suspects should they appear. Should any damage or expenses be done send the bill to us. Get him up, we're moving out." He barked at his men before smiling at the old man with a polite bow. "Have a good day sir."

"And to you sir!" the old man responded with renewed happiness, bowing back prior to yelling into a door to his right, likely leading to the kitchens. "Fuki! Get out some tea and dango for 'em. They're gonna be here a while!"

"On it!" a woman's voice called from what he could assume was the kitchen, the owner already speaking with some of the Shinsengumi soldiers about where they could sit while they waited for their suspects to appear. Even as they did and he left with everyone else, the place seemed to relax now that the violence had passed effortlessly. Once again leading the way back, Hijikata took heart that one of the men who'd hurt his friends was no longer roaming free, without name and faceless. Now he had something to point his anger at.

Chizuru tried not to sneeze as some of the flour tried to puff into her face, the thin cloud of white obscuring her vision for a moment. A slight misstep on her part had the fine powder rising in even finer clouds to spread itself all over her workspace and the kitchen, her red shirt already looking a bit pink after being covered in the stuff. It did nothing to deter her though, as she waited for the floating particles to fall back down before going back to work, already more than half done with her task. Stacked neatly to the side, a number of daifuku were already stacked evenly in groups of white, as well as a pastel pink and green. With luck, she could finish the last of them before she had to start lunch. _Speaking of which, where did I put those fresh vegetables I found today?_ She thought, not hearing the dark blue sheet at the door get pushed back as someone entered the room. Chizuru was so focused on her work that as she put the last of her latest batch of daifuku on the tray and picked it up, she backed away from the counter only to bump into something solid instead of open space.

Startled, the young woman let out a cry of surprise, nearly dropping the tray of unbaked daifuku as she turned to see a just as startled Saito looking at her. Blinking at him as if he'd suddenly appeared from nowhere, Chizuru found it hard to speak for a moment before finally exclaiming. "Saito-san! What are you doing here? You startled me!"

"I'm sorry. I'll leave then." He found himself stammering, not wanting to look the young woman in the eye in embarrassment.

"What? No wait! Oh dear you're covered in flour now! You can't go walking around like that." Chizuru exclaimed upon spotting that she had created large amounts of white flour to grey up his black kimono, the fabric giving a distinct imprint the young woman's powdered form had made on his. Putting the tray of rice cakes down, Chizuru frowned as she searched for something to wipe the powder off. "Just a moment."

Looking down, Saito frowned at the mess but thought little of it. Until Chizuru turned back around again, this time with a wet cloth in

hand. "No, it's fine." Saito attempted to protest, backing away. It was bad enough he was reacting the way he was but the last thing he wanted was to make things worse.

But Chizuru managed to grab hold of his sleeve before he could escape, gently tugging the man closer to better examine the mess she'd made. "It most certainly isn't so hold still!" he did stop, feeling foolish at watching the girl try to remove the flour from his clothes. They both ended up dusting it off, Chizuru attacking the more persistent of the powder patches with the cloth before examining her work. "There, that should do it. Now then, did you want to talk to me about something?"

Again feeling foolish, Saito let his jewel blue gaze fall on the neat stacks of rice cakes taking up most of the kitchen. "What are you making?"

Blinking, Chizuru looked back at them before chuckling to herself. "Oh, all this? Just some daifuku to give to everyone, as a treat especially since everyone's been working so hard this week. I know we can get them at any store but they might cost too much. I had enough of my own money to get the supplies and since the weather is so agreeable today I thought I'd make them. No snitching you hear?"

"Of course not. They look good." He told her, honest like always. Though he'd yet to taste one, Saito was certain they would make a decent snack.

Chizuru nodded with a smile. "It's been a long time since I made any but I know everyone will enjoy them." Her knowing gaze made Saito go stiff, her smile remaining kind as she spoke. "And changing the subject won't save you. What did you really want to talk about?"

Saito's brain froze for a moment. _I've been caught!_ Words were hard to find as he tried to come up with an excuse, anything to keep her from staring at him like that. In the end, he finally up and said. "Iâ€"I wasâ€"concerned."

"Oh? About?" Chizuru asked, looking puzzled by his statement.

Letting out a breath, Saito explained. "Souji told us about the man today, and what you did. Was putting yourself into such danger necessary?"

Chizuru frowned. "If it meant catching him, then yes. Any other time and I certainly wouldn't have. But we had no way of knowing if he'd leave or if he'd return next I left the compound. It was all in the moment." Her smile returned, bringing with it the kind and gentle expression she always seemed to wear. "Were you worried about me?"

"Yes." He admitted, quickly looking away. In the back of his mind, Saito honestly hoped he wasn't blushing right then.

"Hmm I see." Chizuru took his response in stride, not seeming all that bothered by his attempts to avoid her gaze. "Well as you can see, I'm perfectly fine so there was no real need. Now, unless you're going to help make lunch, I suggest you run off before I draft you

into it."

Relieved they were talking about something else, Saito looked at her curiously. "Who is meant to assist you?"

"Heisuke-kun and Shinpachi-san but I know they'll find a reason to compete with each other. Unless you'd like to stay instead." She offered, still smiling.

Saito shook his head, willing himself not to sound rushed in his escape. "No, I didn't mean to intrude. I'll get out of your way."

Chizuru eyed him curiously but let it slide. "Well, if you insist. I still need to give you your medicine once I'm done cooking and we still need to give you an exam but I suppose it can wait a day. Now off with you before I cover you in more flour."

"Of course. I shall gather the others while you work." He managed to say as he turned to leave, mentally happy he hadn't made too much of a fool of himself.

The young woman smiled broadly as she turned back to her work, picking the tray back up as she headed for the oven. "That would be a help, thank you."

As he stepped into the hall, Saito was met by the two captains Chizuru had slotted to help her, Heisuke responding to his presence first with a smile. "Oh, Saito-san! Did you need something from the kitchen?"

"No Todo-kun, I don't. Only not to snitch, else she might react badly." Saito stated casually as he let the two pass him.

"Snitch? Snitch what?" Shinpachi asked with a confused stare.

Saito only shook his head, a ghost of a smile on his lips. "You shall see."

Even more confused, the pair looked at each other before continuing on, ducking under the dark blue curtain and into the kitchen. Predictably, Heisuke was the first to exclaim. "Whoa! Rice cakes! You're the best Chizuru-chan!"

A loud whap met Saito's ears, making him jump at the noise while Chizuru let out an angry hiss. "No snitching!"

"S-sorry!" the pair managed to say before falling silent.

I warned you. Saito thought as he continued to walk away, a bit surprised at himself to find he was smiling. Did what just happened amuse him so much that he reacted without even thinking? Baffled, Saito let the smile fade as he continued on his way, trying to remember where the other captains could be as he faintly pondered. _What's going on with me?_

Lunch went smoothly as Heisuke and Shinpachi had finally been convinced not to compete for their food though it didn't stop them from arguing. Only when they got loud and boisterous about it did Chizuru give them a stern look, making the two men pale and sit

properly without another word. As amusing as their display of friendly opposition was, the meal went as smoothly as expected, the silence filled with talk of training, patrolling and what minor things they'd observed or encountered. Watching them all from her seat, Chizuru could only look on with amusement, her brain already taking what little tactical information they let slip like a sponge in water to be set aside for later. The rest she had an honest interest in, for she didn't see these men as just her protectors but as friends despite the short amount of time they'd known each other. Any other in her position would just see them as pawns to be manipulated and moved like pieces on a board. But not Chizuru. She cared too much about them to see them that way. So she sat quietly and listened, taking heart that not only did the men surrounding her didn't see her as a threat but as a friend and asset as she intended.

"Chizuru-chan! Is it time now?" Heisuke's voice brought her out of her reverie, the young captain looking edgy with anticipation.

Looking between Chizuru and Heisuke, Kondo scowled in his befuddlement. "Time? Time for what?"

Ignoring him, Chizuru nodded her approval, smiling at her friend's antsy behavior. "That it is, if you and Shinpachi-san would see to it."

"You got it. C'mon Shinpat!" Heisuke exclaimed as he shot to his feet, the larger man quickly following as the two rushed out the door like children finally allowed to play outside.

"Time for what? What're you talking about?" Harada asked, everyone but Saito nodding in agreement. Everyone was confused but him.

Chizuru only continued to smile in triumph to herself and amusement at them. "Oh just a little something I was able to whip up, that's all."

"Ooh a mystery! Chizuru-chan is being devious!" Souji chuckled in impish mirth, only making the girl roll her eyes at him.

"Hush Okita-san, or you'll get none."

Almost immediately the man pouted childishly, giving her the most pitiful look he could muster. "Aw so cruel! Must you be so mean to me?"

She only stared, her smile wry as she spoke plainly. "Only when you work so hard to make a fool of yourself."

"She got you there Okita-san." Harada chuckled, the other captains save Saito letting out sounds of mirth as Souji continued to pout. "In for a battle of wits with this one."

"We're back!" Heisuke said, having come back a bit more unhurriedly than he'd left, holding a large tray of the daifuku Chizuru had worked nearly all day to make. Behind him Shinpachi followed with more tea to wash them down with.

Smiling in spite of his awe, Kondo couldn't help but laugh a little at the young woman's ability to surprise. "You made these? For us? Yukimura-san that wasn't necessary."

Chizuru only shook her head, her expression softening. "But it is. I know change is hard and that I've made it a tad difficult, but at least this is one way I can make up for it. My only hope is that you enjoy them."

As Heisuke set the tray down, each man didn't hesitate to take one or two, thanking the pair for their aid before biting into the cakes. Chizuru watched with anticipation to their reactions, which began with loud hums of contentment. Heisuke, who'd been itching to eat one since he'd first seen them, was the first to speak past a mouthful of rice and anko beans. "Wow this is good! Better than some of the shops sell. You should do this more often, that's for sure."

"If I did, you'd become bigger than Shinpachi-san—but in the wrong way." Chizuru teased, earning a playful scowl from the young captain.

Beside him, Shinpachi merely scoffed. "Heisuke? Get bigger than me? Never! I'm surprised he's not smaller than you Chizuru-chan!"

"What? Just you wait Shinpachi, I'll find a way to beat you eventually!"

"In your dreams kid." The larger warrior retorted with a loud laugh, ruffling the boy's hair which only made him more irritated. Sure enough, the two were arguing again. Chizuru would've stopped them but she was too busy laughing to really care. When the men finally noticed, her mirth had come down to a more contained chortle, the delicate skin of her face almost red from a mix of joviality and embarrassment.

"We got her to laugh! She laughed! Really laughed!" Heisuke exclaimed despite Shinpachi's large hand making his neck bend in an odd direction. But for a second or two the young captain faltered. "So it's safe to say Chizuru-chan feels at home with us now?"

Home? Am I truly at home with these people? Looking between each man, every single one gazed at her with honest curiosity to her answer to Heisuke's question. Even Hijikata, who at first was almost livid at the knowledge of having a woman in a military compound was staring her down with a mix of friendly anticipation and hard regret. The room had become so quiet, you could hear a mouse in the wall sneeze. Blushing a bit more, this time with pure happiness, Chizuru gave them all an open smile coupled with a vigorous nod. "Yes Heisuke-kun, I really do."

A wave of relief swept through the room, followed by exclamations and laughter, smile and small talk filling up the rest of their lunch hour. But beside her in his usual spot, Saito had been tense when Heisuke had voiced the question he'd never thought to even consider. Knowing he was unobserved, Saito didn't bother to hide his fear over her potential answer. Would she say no and possibly move on—or say yes and stay? From the way the rest of his comrades had fallen silent, they'd been thinking the same thing, having become attached to the young woman no differently than him. Him more so since he knew her for longer, though thankfully Sannan had yet to show anything but

professional kindness and pure friendship to her. He, on the other hand, had somehow been turned into a fumbling fool, unable to look her in the eye or speak to her properly. And somehow the prospect of her leaving them all behind, leaving him behind, for an unknown path bothered him. Normally it wouldn't but now? Now wasn't 'normal' anymore. So when she'd said yes, he'd relaxed same as everyone else, though some tension still remained and not just in his body but in his heart. Somehow, someway, this girl had gotten past his defenses without even trying. The real question now was: should he shut her out, or continue to let her in?

Seated across from him, Souji watched his stoic friend carefully. He could tell the man was pondering about his relationship with Chizuru, who was oblivious to Saito's cautious examination of her. Her voice, her face, her body language, the man was taking it all in no differently than he would an opponent but his eyes gave away the intent behind his intense scrutiny. As of right then, Saito was coming to a decision and not just about Chizuru, but about himself in a fashion he was must unfamiliar. Smirking before looking away, returning to the topic at hand, Souji silently willed his friend to make the right choice and for the better.

Jin stared at the wall of his prison cell in miserable anger. It was bad enough that idiot Hiro was stuck in there with him but Sanji, Manzo and Botan had been snagged going back to the inn. From what the others could tell him, Yoshi had run off before the soldiers could get him and lost him in the late day crowds. With any luck, he could get out of the city and tell their master what'd happened. With even more luck, Yoshi would live to see tomorrow depending on how angry Kazama turned out to be. And from what he was able to tell, the only reason they had gotten caught at all was because Manzo was cuffed for following a boy around. A boy who looked very much like the girl they'd been sent to find. Jin was no fool: the boy was truly the girl in disguise and somehow, for some reason, the Shinsengumi were protecting her. Who they were and what interest they had in her, he cared little. Only getting out or finding a way to tell his master that despite their capture, they'd succeeded in finding the girl. If it was really her after all and not just another ploy to throw him off. What's more, where had the man with glasses come from? He hadn't recalled seeing him in the market earlier that day and neither had Manzo once he was pushed into remembering where he'd been and who he'd seen. As usual the foolish man could only tell them very little, his focus was so intent on finding the girl that the boy he'd gotten into trouble over was the closest he'd come to fulfilling his purpose. Biting at his thumb thoughtfully, Jin glared at the wall in frustration. Was it possible that the spectacled man was a member of the Shinsengumi? That would definitely turn the situation to their advantage, hence why he and his friend had been so difficult back in Edo. Only a smart and talented group of skilled warriors could find one of such skill. True, his cutting the man's friend in the side had been cheap and had actually brought surprise to the man's blank face, but it was enough to even the odds a bit. All he had to do now was balance them out again. Smirking devilishly at the wall, thankful none of his fellow ronin could see, Jin had only one weapon left to him: his mind. If these men wanted to play games, then so could he.

Oh man! A bit longer than usual but worth the wait I'm sure. Thanks so much to everyone who reviewed and even more to those who faved this. Love to all! But enough of my rants, it's time for what you've

been waiting for!

Next Chapter:

Chapter 5: Blood on the Blade

As Chizuru settles in with her new friends, trouble continues to stir on the horizon: Kazama's demon red gaze has fallen on Kyoto and he's intent on finding his prize but for what purpose? What other surprises are in store for our cast? Can Saito find it in his cold, clean and linear mind to finally feel, to finally do more than just fight? And if he does, will Chizuru reject or accept him? Will their relationship survive the coming weeks of blood and violence? Just wait and find out in:

**Chapter 5: Blood on the Blade!**

5. Chapter 5: Blood on the Blade

Hey everybody, Blue here once again for '_Tears of the Demon_'! I've been hard at work getting chapters out as best I can and hope everyone truly loves what I've posted so far. You've been great and I'm enjoying the praise, really. Now that I've done my bit, I don't own '_HSK_' but I'll be damned if I don't get it on DVD someday. Enjoy!

"Iii" = speech

Iii = thought

Chapter 5: Blood on the Blade

Staring out at his expansive garden, Kazama took vague interest in a late season butterfly making its almost drunken way over the pond and towards a bush. He'd sent his men to Kyoto over a week ago and had yet to hear even a whisper of what the human fools were up to. _I knew I should've sent Amagiri with themâ€¦ he'd keep the damn vermin in line no problem._ He thought absently as the butterfly, a sprite and brightly colored thing, did loops before vanishing somewhere beyond the pond and the bushes behind it. Behind him, the sound of rushed footsteps met his ears, followed by the sound of his door being slid open.

"My lord!" a servant gasped, straining to sound respectful in spite of his haste. "A messenger has returned from Kyoto!"

Blinking his surprise at his news, Kazama turns to stare at the servant. "What? When?"

Sweating either from nerves or from running, Kazama didn't know or care, the man kept his head bowed as he spoke, his words coming out rushed. "Only a few moments ago, I came as soon as I was informed myself, my lord. It's Yoshi, one of the men you sent with Jin."

"Bring him to me." Kazama retorted coldly, turning away from the man, ignoring the servant's flinch.

The servant stammered as he backed out of the room again. "At once

milord!"

Kazama only had to wait less than two minutes before more footsteps came thumping across the floors of his mansion, followed once again by his door being slid open. Two sets came in before halting some distance in, Yoshi's familiar voice sounding off behind him. "My lord, forgive my tardiness. I came as quickly as my horse would allow."

As he turned around again, he looked down at the slightly disheveled man, wearing a dirt-covered and sweaty yukata of a faded red. His own red eyes seemed to burn holes into the top of the mercenary's head. "I'll forgive you when you I hear what news you have. Speak now."

"Yes, of course." Yoshi stammered, obviously nervous about facing his employer face-to-face, not for the first time but definitely without any of the other of his band there to act as a shield from the oni's gaze. "As his lordship is aware, we went to Kyoto seeking the girl. For several days we found nothing when, close to seven days ago everyone but me was arrested. I managed to escape before they caught me but I saw who they were."

"And? Who were they?" Kazama stated, trying not to sound impatient. The last thing he wanted was to scare one of his own men into silence.

Suddenly, Yoshi looked angry but kept his gaze locked on the floor, knowing the man before him would see it as disrespect. "It was soldiers of the Shinsengumi my lord! They had come to our inn and were waiting for us. They got Sanji and Hiro but I managed to get down the street before they could catch me and I got a horse before they could close the gates."

Mildly impressed, Kazama stared at the man thoughtfully. Maybe he wasn't so useless after all. "You came straight here? No delays?"

Yoshi shook his head, seeming to take some small pride with himself for returning as quickly as he did. "None sir, I barely slept and changed horse several times but little else. I knew you'd want to hear this news as quickly as possible and surmised a message might take too long. Otherwise, I would've been caught myself."

"That was wise of you and I commend you for your foresight. And yet you know nothing about the girl, or the warriors at all?" Kazama asked, managing to keep his voice neutral. What the man said next kept the oni from killing him.

Again Yoshi shook his head, this time with hints of disappointment. "Not personally no but, maybe the others do hence possibly why they were caught." He paused, unsure of what else to say. "As I said, I came as quickly as I could to report to his lordship."

Kazama scowled, thinking it strange that his men had been caught so quickly. "Hm, this does hinder my plans some. Very well, get some rest and report to me tomorrow for further orders. Be gone."

Suppressing a smile of relief, Yoshi bowed further as he backed away,

following the servant to the door. "You're most kind my lord, thank you." With that, the pair were gone, again rushing to get away but with a bit less haste in their steps. Unnoticed in the corner, a large man stood up straight and came into the light of the sun shining lazily into the room. Hair a dull crimson and eyes of opaque purple, the tall oni was as large as he was strong, dark kimono and haori shifting slightly as he moved. Amagiri had long served Kazama's family and now wasn't any different.

The large man looked at the door where the two men had vanished before looking back at his master, his deep, calm and ever polite voice seeming to rumble like thunder. "That girl has either gotten smarter or she has help. What did you want to do?"

"Exactly what I've wanted to do this whole time: send in the dogs." Kazama growled, red eyes shimmering with frustration.

Amagiri smirked only just, giving the young oni lord a bemused look. "You see me as a dog now sir?"

Kazama found himself smirking in turn, though a bit more coldly. "Just the most loyal and capable kind, and nothing like these almost rabid humans under my employ. Take Shiranui with you. Find the girl and bring her back to me. Take more of the humans with you to ensure your success against these interlopers. It would be wise if you didn't fail me like they have."

"Yes, my lord." Amagiri said with a deep bow before he too left the room, his steps sounding as deep as his voice against the flooring.

Ruby red eyes stared at the garden, the butterfly having come back to swoop over the pond in endless circles, the colorful bug seeming lost at the sight of its own reflection. It didn't get to ponder long as a shape made of opaque white and almost burnt orange shifted and jumped at the insect, the koi fish opening its large mouth wide to swallow its victim whole. As the fish landed back in the water with a loud splash, making the pond's water ripple almost violently in response, Kazama let a toothy grin spread across his face. Despite their failures, it was possible his supposedly useless human servants had found what he sought after all.

"All the way up." Chizuru instructed, watching the stoic warrior obey, the limb stretched towards the ceiling. Noting that there was no straining to keep it upright, she asked him. "You feel no pain at all?"

Jewel blue eyes glanced at her as he shook his head. Though the door to the room was open, both seemed able to ignore the chill of winter that drifted in. "None. Aches sometimes, mostly when I move it but little else."

Chizuru looked thoughtful but eventually nodded. "Hmm that's good. Now to the side."

Saito obeyed, breathing much easier now that more than a week had gone by, rest and Chizuru's medicines working in unison to make his swift recovery seem miraculous. Now he sat in the young woman's office that doubled as her clinic, letting himself be poked and prodded by her small hands and their delicate fingers. Ever

observant, Chizuru's hazel brown eyes watched his arm and shoulder for proper range of motion while glancing at his face for even a hint of discomfort in his features. But Saito had remained pain-free as the session dragged on, feeling only slight aches from his disused muscles and only residual pangs from his lung. Naturally he told Chizuru this and she'd only smiled, telling him that was normal and that both would eventually fade. More so, the wound of his ordeal would be little more than a discoloring line across his body than become a scar, also thanks to Chizuru's skills with needle and herbs. So he sat patiently as Chizuru gently and carefully felt the muscles of his arm, seeming to be in search of something that escaped him. After a moment she backed off, smiling her approval. "Alright you can put it down now."

He did as he was bid as the familiar ache of the muscles came flowing through him but it was so minor he easily ignored it. Since he honestly wanted to know, he asked. "Your diagnosis Chizuru-san?"

Her reaction was a big smile as she informed him casually. "It would be a wise move to reenter your normal routine slowly, exercise and training should get rid of those aches after a while but aside from that, you're completely healed. I'm sure Hijikata-san will be most pleased to hear it when he and Sannan-san come back from their trip."

"Yes, he will." Saito responded, knowing that the vice captain would be pleased but Sannan would be relieved that his friend hadn't been permanently maimed.

Chizuru nodded and kept going, heading for her desk where paper was stacked neatly, pulling one from the top before reaching for the brush. "In the meantime, as I said take it slow but getting some training in today wouldn't hurt the slightest. Try and get yourself back into fighting form before trying for patrol duty."

"Thank you." He said, getting to his feet to head for the door where his shoes sat on the floor, easily slipping them on over his tabi.

Turning to watch him leave, Chizuru smiled widely and sincerely at him. "You're most welcome Saito-san. If you'll excuse me, I'd best write that report for Kondo-san. Enjoy the rest of your day."

"Thank you." Saito responded with a respectful bow, turning on his heel and walking out once she'd bowed in turn. As he walked away though, Saito was mentally kicking himself for a perfect opportunity wasted, a chance to try and talk to the young woman about his potential feelings for her lost. Irritated with his own foolishness, Saito felt the sudden urge to let his frustration out in the form of a loud roar but nearly bit his lip open keeping it contained. Such an outburst would attract attention and it would be so out of character most would think he'd suddenly gone mad or worse. He forced himself to take a calming breath or two, letting the fact that though he'd yet to speak to Chizuru on the matter didn't mean he wouldn't get another chance. He would just have to find a way of doing it properly, alone and without distraction and most of all, timing it well enough not to be strange or awkward. It was situations like this that he always remained silent: anything he said could come out wrong or be misinterpreted so badly that he ruined things. Having seen the others do this countless times, and being witness to the tragic

results, Saito knew that if he was going to go through with this, he needed to at least try to figure out what to say. If he could even bring himself to say it to begin with.

"Well, well, if it isn't Saito-san!" a familiar voice called out, casual but knowing.

Pausing to look who was speaking, Saito felt a pang of unease upon seeing the russet-haired samurai. But ever polite, he just nodded as the other man caught up with him. "Okita-san."

Green eyes shining with mischief, Souji gave his friend his usual smirk. "Up and about I see. So has Chizuru-chan given you permission yet?"

Saito nodded, moving to keep walking, Souji quick to follow. "She has. I go to practice."

Next to him, Souji immediately smiled a little wider, his interest piqued at the man's ability to finally wield a sword. "Really? Well I'll go with you! See if I can keep up with you."

"If you wish." Saito responded casually, internally bracing for any indication of what his fellow captain was up to.

But Souji kept up the charade, though the sly look in his eyes didn't help. "Did she clear you for patrols though?"

"No, she said it was wise to wait."

"Ah." They walked in silence for a moment before Souji finally deadpanned. "You still haven't told her have you?"

Saito tensed up immediately, jewel blue eyes wide with honest confusion though he was panicking inside. "Told her what?"

Beside him, Souji seemed to deflate dramatically, giving his friend a bemused look at his baffled expression. "Saito, my friend, if you think I'm blind then you're wrong. It's obvious to me you're interested in her."

Am I that obvious? Saito thought, a bit crestfallen that he'd been discovered so quickly by the other man. "I-it is?"

"Yes, it really is but you're wise to hide it from the others. Who knows how much they'll tease you about it!" Souji retorted with an amused laugh.

Recovering quickly, Saito gave his fellow captain a hard stare as he bit out. "You do that yourself well enough."

"Only because it's fun." Souji stated, raising his hands in surrender when his friend's gaze became a full-on glare. "I'm kidding! But honestly Saito-san, you mustn't let these feelings remain hidden for long else you'll burst at the seams. Are you sure you didn't try to mention it when you were there?"

Anger vanishing, Saito turned away with a frown. "It wasn't the appropriate time. To do so would've been unprofessional."

Considering him for a moment, Souji gazed at him thoughtfully before answering. "Hmm I see what you mean. Bringing it up right then would've been a poor choice but next you see your opportunity, take it. Life is too short for such regrets." Smiling widely and patting him almost roughly on the shoulder, Souji gave his friend a light push forward. "Enough on that though, we'd best get you back into fighting form again. I'm sure Heisuke has been itching to take you on since you got back from Edo."

Saito walked with his fellow captain to the training area in silence, his face its usual mask of disinterest but inside he was reeling. The fact his feelings for Chizuru were so strong they showed on his face was shocking enough, but that Souji had figured him out was worse. Knowing the man, anything he came up with would likely lead to trouble that would only please him rather than help others. As they got to the training grounds, seeing others were already there with practice swords in matches, Souji didn't hesitate to start calling all around to tell them he'd finally been approved to join them. The surprise and relief that spread through those gathered was palpable, but did little to lighten Saito's mood. Beside him Souji was talking and laughing, probably coming up with some crazy scheme that would only stress him more. Responding to his fellow warriors with nods and short answers, Saito couldn't help but think: _what have I gotten myself into?_

Shuffling through the snowbound streets of Kyoto, a slim figure walked calmly and purposefully along the outer wall of the mansion, ever aware of anyone around who might see him. As of yet, none had noticed him, dressed in a thick cloak protecting him from the early winter's harsh chill. Finding a good spot to go over, the man looked around to make sure none could see him before jumping for the ice covered tiles, getting a good grip and hoisting himself over. Ignoring the frigid snow that tried to block him, the man fell lightly and stealthily to the ground beyond and onto his feet, eyes darting for anyone who may spot him. Like on the other side, no one was around, no activity save for an open door across the yard to his right. From what he knew of the mansion's layout, the room beyond the open door was exactly where he wished to go. Crossing the yard, quick but silent, the figure made his way towards the door in several long strides, practically jumping onto the wooden deck. Once there, he looked around one last time for any observers, saw no one and slipped inside while sliding the shoji door shut behind him.

Susumu Yamazaki was still in full shinobi gear as he walked through the mansion, having just come back from a surveillance detail. He was heading to his room to change when a dark shape caught his eye. Violet orbs tracked the movement easily, adrenaline aiding his vision as well as his own motions, quickly hiding behind a wall when the shape that he identified as a cloaked figure turned to look around. Appeased at finding nothing, there was no sound save for the light shuffle of a shoji being slid shut, making Yamazaki turn back around the corner to find the stranger was gone. Upon glancing at this area mere seconds earlier, Yamazaki had recognized that the door that'd been open was Chizuru's clinic. And if the door had been open—
Then Chizuru is still inside! If this person is another kidnapper, then I need to get help. Like a shot, Yamazaki forgot all fatigue and darted back the way he'd come and towards the training grounds, knowing several of the captains were there. If anyone wanted to know about this, then they were certainly it.

Chizuru didn't think much of someone softly coming in and shutting the door. She was used to the men coming in that way when they needed help, especially when they saw her at her desk as she was. Only when the person spoke did she jump in surprise. "Chizuru! It really is you!"

Turning, Chizuru's chocolate eyes widened when an odd figure wearing a cloak removed their hood to reveal the one person she hadn't expected to see. "Kaoru? What're you doing here? I thought you were in Edo!"

Her only brother and sibling, not to mention her almost identical twin, Kaoru was just as tall and slim as his sister, all the way down to the color of their eyes. Only major differences were his hair was cut short and he had the katana that was paired with Chizuru's own short sword. At her words, his relieved smile gave way to a dark frown. "I was but I found your house empty. I had to sneak in, there was so many watching it."

"There are people watching my house? Could you tell who they were?" Chizuru asked him with her own grim tone, just as confused by this news. Anyone watching the house should've moved off by now.

Kaoru shook his head, short hair shifted with the movement as he continued to frown with irritation. "No, if they work for anyone, they hid their involvement well. Especially if they're using humans to do their dirty work."

Only then did Chizuru frown herself, her voice firm. "We talked about that Kaoru, humans aren't as inferior as you think."

"Is that why you're here, working like a servant? What a way to treat my sister!" her brother growled angrily, his eyes burning with inner rage.

Chizuru cut him off before he could continue. "It's a position I asked for, one I actually enjoy no matter what you think. Thanks to father, it's the only way I can repay them for housing me."

Frowning, Kaoru didn't respond but instead changed the subject. "Hence why I'm here, looking for you. You left a note, but it only said you'd come here to Kyoto. Why?"

"That's exactly it Kaoru! Father was here, working for the Shinsengumi, but now he's gone missing and they came to the house looking for him. I convinced them to let me come here when we were attacked."

Surprised, Kaoru could only gape before his youthful face twisted in fury. "Attacked? By the men watching the house?"

"We believe so but who they work for has yet to be divulged. A few were caught following me back from the market and they've yet to talk. And I doubt they will." Chizuru admitted, sounding tired as she leaned back a little against her desk. Just thinking about it was giving her a headache.

Coming to sit across from her, Kaoru rubbed his chin in thought. "Hmm

that means they're either being paid very well, or don't wish to die for potential disloyalty to their employer. But honestly Chizuru, must you let these humans treat you this way?"

Letting out a tired sigh, she openly glared at him in annoyance. "They respect me same as they respect each other and have treated me with kindness. If anything, they've gone out of their way to make me feel at home here. Leaving now would be suspicious and harmful. They're my friends Kaoru, I'm not about to abandon them."

"Fine, but I still don't like it. In the meantime, what should be done now?" Kaoru asked, looking away from his sister's heated gaze.

Satisfied by his reaction, Chizuru continued, tone still firm. "Not much until the two of the captains come back from a trip, I'm not sure where. The most we've done is wait" "is someone coming?" she asked, both clearly hearing the thundering rush of footsteps coming along the wooden walkway. Both got their feet as Chizuru whispered harshly. "Were you spotted?"

"I was careful I swear!" Kaoru snarled back, hurriedly putting his hood back on and drawing his sword as he turned towards the door.

Shocked, Chizuru managed to call out. "Kaoru, don't do anything you'll regret!"

Too late for as the door opened, Kaoru was already in a defensive stance, the first to step forward with his own sword was Heisuke. The youngest captain glared at the other boy, his eyes hard as stone as he called out. "Get away from Chizuru-chan!"

Much to everyone's surprise, his words were enough to make Kaoru screech out in full-on rage, knocking Yamazaki aside roughly when he tried to block the other man's path and instead running forward to clash swords with the captain, yelling. "I'll tear you apart!"

"Kaoru, no!" Chizuru called out, hoping to stop her sibling with words rather than force.

But it was too late, the boy was already hacking at Heisuke's defense, making the young captain retreat as quickly as the blows came down, their blades sending sparks flying. All around them, soldiers moved to block the boy's path to the wall and any exit while Heisuke struggled to hold his ground. Close by, Shinpachi, Souji, Saito and Harada all stood by with their own swords, glaring at the cloaked figure as he unleashed an almost endless barrage of attacks at their younger comrade. Chizuru silently cursed as she pulled a handkerchief from her pocket to staunch the blood coming from Yamazaki's head wound, the spy nodding his thanks as he moved to hold the cloth in place. Looking over at the would-be fight, she almost cursed aloud to see that Heisuke was barely keeping himself from being hacked to pieces. She had to act fast if more harm was to be prevented.

Looking at the closest soldier, who was watching the fight with a hard glare, Chizuru spoke with authority as she called to him. "You there!" the man turned, blinking at the sound of her voice, some of

his hostility vanishing upon seeing who was speaking to him. She felt guilty for not knowing his name, but there was no time. "Yes you! Get Susumu-san inside while I deal with this."

"But Yukimura-san, if I just let you-."

"There is no time to argue! If I let this continue, Todo-taicho could be killed!" the soldier stared at her, shocked. He jumped with she nearly shouted. "Quickly!"

"Yes, at once!" the soldier managed to say, rehousing his sword before moving to obey her, gently helping Yamazaki to his feet. Chizuru only moved away when they began to reenter the clinic, turning to face the skirmish with an expression made of stone. Drawing her short sword, Chizuru didn't hesitate to dart forward.

Heisuke had never met anyone like this stranger, he could barely block and was given no time to dodge as one slash after another was brought down on him with vicious succession. The amount of pure aggression, the sheer rage of the man's movements were beyond anything the young captain had ever encountered before. Still, Heisuke did his best not to back down or give in, else he'd give Shinpachi something new to tease him about. All the while they fought, Heisuke was only able to get one strike in, and the man had dodged it like it was nothing just to come back just as strong as before. Heisuke could almost swear the man was trying to break his arms, if not his sword. Just as another set of strikes were about to come down on him, Heisuke let out a grunt as he was rather bodily shoved out of the way. Stunned the young captain stumbled away just for Harada to come forward to keep him steady. Confused, Heisuke turned only to be shocked further to find Chizuru had taken his place, her short sword locked with the stranger's katana. And from the way the stranger was hesitating, he was just as stunned as he was, unable to defend as Chizuru did some attacking of her own. The rest of the fight went swiftly, the young woman able to use her weapon's shorter length to get well within the stranger's range but too far in for proper strikes thus throwing him off. With a powerful parry the katana went flying to land point first to the side, followed by the girl darting forward to shoulder him in the stomach. The blow sent the stranger stumbling backwards and into Shinpachi's strong grip, bringing his large arms under those of his stunned foe and locking them at the shoulder.

Stunned but still enraged, the stranger's young voice was practically shrill as he snarled at them all. "Let me go! Let me go dammit! I'll take you all! How dare you treat me like this? I'll make sure you all burn for it!"

"Kaoru! That's enough." Chizuru stated, her eyes burning and her face a mask of barely contained rage at her sibling's actions.

From behind the intruder, Shinpachi stared at the young girl in confusion. "Chizuru-chan, you know this guy?"

"I'm sorry that it happened this way but there seems to be no avoiding it now. Everyone, meet my older twin, Kaoru." The young woman stated, much to the shock of everyone within hearing distance.

Stunned, Heisuke called from where Harada was helping him stay upright. "Wait, you have a twin?"

"He's a hot-headed fool but yes, this young man is my brother." Chizuru admitted, turning to the larger man before her. "Shinpachi-san, if you would."

Despite his confusion, Shinpachi still managed to pull the hood off his captive without losing his grip on him. Upon seeing what Chizuru said was true rippled through the collected onlookers. If they didn't know any better, there were two instead of just one Chizuru! "Whoa! She's not kiddin'! They're practically identical!"

Angry and openly snarling, the young boy glared up at Shinpachi viciously. "Unhand me and fight me like a man dammit! I'll gut you and your friend for this!"

"Kaoru!" Chizuru bit out, her voice having become cold as ice, stopping her brother short. "How many times must I warn you before you learn? There will be no gutting, not when I have a patient to attend to."

Surprised, her look-alike turned to stare at her in disbelief. "But-."

Chizuru continued to glare coldly at her sibling. "No buts! We shall speak later, when you've had a chance to cool your head." Turning away from him, she turned her attention to the spear-wielder only a few feet away. "Harada-san, if you'd see Heisuke-kun to my office please."

A bit shaken but determined to keep his composure, the redheaded warrior nodded as he pulled one of Heisuke's arms over his shoulder. "Sure thing Chizuru-chan. C'mon Heisuke, let's get you patched up."

"The sword please." Chizuru commanded, stepping forward to pull the sword's scabbard from her brother's belt. One of the soldiers came walking over, helping her sheathe it before accepting the short sword to place it back in her office.

Watching it all in shock, Kaoru suddenly began to struggle more, his voice coming loud and desperate. "Chizuru-!"

Ignoring him, Chizuru handed the sword over Souji, who was watching her with a truly serious look on his face. "Okita-san, please take this and hide it where none but you can hope to find it. My brother will remain here so long as the sword is."

Forest green eyes darted to the young boy, who by now had stopped struggling, watching his sister in sad confusion. "And him?"

"Give him a room away from others, tie him up if you must but don't underestimate him. And if he should escape, he'll remain in the city out of loyalty to me." She said with an unusual cold finality before turning back to her brother with a harsh stare. "I expect you to stay put until this is sorted out Kaoru, and without protest. Continue this path, and I may have to give up on you completely." Once again turning to the gathered men, she spoke with a much kinder tone of authority. "Shinpachi-san, everyone. If there's anyone else who may

be injured, please follow me to my office. This incident is now resolved."

Mouth agape in shock, Kaoru couldn't find a thing to say as Shinpachi hauled the young man away, surrounded by soldiers to keep him from escaping as both Souji and Saito remained behind. Looking at the young woman carefully, Souji didn't bother sounding sarcastic as he remarked to her. "That was pretty cruel of you Chizuru-chan. Was treating him like that really necessary?"

Watching them leave solemnly, Chizuru nodded. "Yes, indeed it is. I'm more than willing to tell you all about it but now isn't the time. I have patients now, courtesy of my brother, who require my attention. Perhaps later when we all have had a chance to calm down and, hopefully, think more clearly."

"Are you okay?" Saito asked, his face ever a mask of disinterest but his concern for her was hard to keep out of his eyes.

Smiling at him Chizuru only nodded. "No but in time I will be. Again, I'm very sorry that all this happened. Had I known he was in the city, I would've handled the introduction myself rather thanâ€¦ all this."

Giving her a smile of his own, Souji tried to be reassuring. "We understand. Just see to Heisuke and Susumu. We'll handle the rest."

"Thank you. That helps immensely." Chizuru managed to say before leaving the two in the yard, rushing over to her office where Harada sat by Heisuke and two soldiers tended to Yamazaki not far off. Assuring them of their work, she chose to focus on the young captain, looking him over with a concerned gaze. "Where does it hurt Heisuke-kun?"

Despite his pain, the young brunette smiled weakly at her. "Everywhere but I'll be fine. Deal with Yamazaki, he needs you more."

"Oh Heisuke-kun I'm so sorry! Had I known he's go off like that-."

"Chizuru-chan it's fine. I'm fine! You've got nothing to be sorry about!" Harada managed to say, smiling as well in an effort to reassure the girl that she was free of any real wrongdoing.

Finally their expressions were enough to satisfy her as she too smiled, if weakly, in return. "If you insist." Then her face became stern again as she looked the young man over, examining bruises and wrapping up cuts that were too big to heal on their own. She then got up to retrieve a small jar from one of the boxes that lined the room. When she returned she held it for Heisuke to take. "You got off lucky with just minor scratches and some bruises, so you should be fine in a week or two. Put this salve on the bruises and they should disappear faster, but come back about the cuts especially if the bandages get wet."

"Right, thanks Chizuru-chan." Heisuke said, smiling a little wider as he took the jar of salve from her, once again using Harada's assistance to stand. "It really isn't your fault. Got it?"

"Yes, thank you." Chizuru said, waving goodbye to the pair before finally going to where the two soldiers were struggling with her other patient. "Yamazaki-san, can you tell me how bad the pain is?"

"Mostly in my head but I'm otherwise uninjured." He said, his violet eyes meeting her warm brown as she stared with regret. Letting out a sigh, the spy didn't bother trying to smile away his pain. "Don't look at me like that Yukimura-san, this wasn't your fault. It's only thanks to you that your brother didn't do much worse."

Nodding at his logic, Chizuru couldn't help but smile at him anyway, the expression unusually free of its usual mirth. "True but I should've done more to prevent this. But I will at least defend your initiative upon thinking he was an intruder. You'll find it's my brother's habit to sneak in like a thief rather than walk in same as any warrior. I think that has much to do with how he was treated."

"How he was treated?" he asked, his face twisted in confusion.

Shaking her head free of the line of thought, Chizuru allowed some warmth return to her face again. "It's a long story, one that must wait. For now, you need to lie down."

"Alright." Yamazaki said as he relented, allowing the two soldiers to help him lie down as the young woman began to examine the nasty bump her brother had given him. True to form, she gave him instructions on what to do and forbid him from doing any work until she was certain he'd suffered no permanent damage. She then ordered one soldier to escort Yamazaki back to his quarters for bed rest while the other reported to Kondo on what'd occurred. Once the trio left did Chizuru finally feel at ease, practically slumping over her desk and onto the report she'd all but forgotten about. Only now instead of having to write on, she now had to write three.

"What? You were attacked by an intruder? How?" Kondo exclaimed to the collection of warriors before him, looking at each of them for the answer.

Taking charge of everything, Harada's golden eyes were hard. "Not just any intruder it seems. Turns out, he's actually Chizuru's twin brother."

"Y-you're kidding!" the head captain stuttered in shock and amazement, trying to picture the boy as they had seen him.

Next to Harada and covered in small bandages, Heisuke shook his head at his commanding officer. "I'm not. He beat me pretty good and gave Yamazaki a nice bump before Chizuru stopped him."

Kondo gaped a little at that, his mind obviously having trouble getting his mind around what he was being told. "Wait a moment, Chizuru stopped him? Now I'm very confused."

"She did, pushed Heisuke out of the way and everything! Disarmed him and told us to lock him up until he calmed down. Given how upset she was with him, I imagine she needs some time too." Shinpachi cut in,

his green eyes going soft at seeing Chizuru looking so irritated and saddened by the boy's actions.

"And she said nothing else?" Kondo pressed, again looking between his men.

Again Harada answered, shaking his head at the man. "Only that she apologized and didn't want to discuss it right then. Apparently there's much that she's been keeping from us."

Not about to let the girl go undefended, Saito cut in with his own monotone response to his comrade's words. "She probably had a good reason. We can't assume anything until we know the truth."

"Well put Saito-san, well put but she can't keep us in the dark forever." Kondo stated, frowning at the usually silent man, his scowl hinted with curiosity.

It was Harada that saved him from further scrutiny as the redhead nodded. "Kondo-san's right, since we all know that secrets can get people killed." He said, voice grave and let the brief silence sink in before he went on. "But it could be wise to wait for Toshi-san and Sannan-san come back. They should here this same as us, hopefully at the same time."

"A wise observation Harada-san." Kondo responded, nodding in turn and distracted by Saito's uncharacteristic outburst. "Given what's happened, it would also be unwise to press Yukimura-san until she's ready to express to us just what is going on."

"Until then it's business as usual? Fine by me." Souji declared in his usual, laidback manner, stretching a little from having to sit around for so long.

Normally kind eyes rounded on the former prodigy, the head captain glaring meaningfully at him, his voice unmistakably stern. "Behave yourself Souji, I may seem slack in discipline but I know you too well. No schemes until Yukimura-san is fully prepared to tell us the truth and not before. Understand?"

Blinking in surprise to the man's curt response, Souji merely smirked lazily, nodding his acceptance to his orders. "Alright, alright, I'll be a good little boy then." Leaning forward so to propel himself upright, Souji the pointed a thumb at Saito with a wide grin. "At least one good thing that came from all this is Chizuru-chan gave Saito-kun the all clear to start training again."

Clearly surprised by this news, Kondo's firm look softened as he turned to the stoic man in question. "Did she? That is good news Saito-san. I hope we can have you back on duty soon. This meeting is adjourned."

More or less the men filed out to go training, Shinpachi already teasing Heisuke about not being strong enough for Chizuru's clearly more talented brother. Watching the pair quarrel like always, Harada stuck back long enough to see Saito following with an oddly sullen look in his eyes. Smiling at his friend and fellow captain, the spear wielder patted him on the shoulder as he spoke. "Don't look so down Saito-san, even you couldn't have predicted all this."

"True." Saito muttered, nodding. It didn't keep him from frowning a bit, still feeling uncomfortable about it all. "But to not tell us she has a brother?"

"We all keep secrets Saito-san, you should know that better than anyone." The redhead pointed out before walking away to break up the fight that Shinpachi was clearly escalating and Souji was watching with his usual bemusement.

Saito didn't respond but still followed his fellow warriors back to the practice fields for daily training before lunch. But the fact that Chizuru had kept such a thing from him still hurt a great deal, even though she seemed to trust them all immensely.

Writing the reports had taken her nearly two hours but she got them done and sent before she needed to head to the kitchens to make the meals for the men. She felt a thrill of pride for having the foresight to prepare some of the dough the day before with the full intention of dealing with it now. At some point, one of the soldiers told her they'd successfully secured her brother in a normally unoccupied part of the mansion and were watching him carefully. She thanked the man and bid him return to his work, reminding him to not do too much else he'd tired too quickly. He thanked her in turn, giving her a smile, barely able to hide the blooming blush on his face as he made his escape. Chizuru had to hold down an infectious giggle as he departed, returning to her work so to better distract herself from the man's reaction. She knew her father had called her 'naturally beautiful' as she had grown from a child into a teenager, already on the verge of being labeled a woman. Every time he told her, she had laughed him off, calling him silly for it. Though she knew what she looked like from puddles or a rare mirror, Chizuru had no delusions about her appearance. Then again she was jealous of all the girls from her neighborhood that always looked so well done and pretty with things she'd never have. _Or I would've hadâ€¦|. But those days are long gone, with no hope of ever seeing them again._

She was brought out of her downward spiral by familiar voices at the door leading into the kitchen. "Chizuru-chan? You already in here?"

Turning to the door, she called back, smiling at hearing the arrival of her helpers. "Yes, come in Harada-san. Ah Shinpachi-san, it's not your turn today."

The towering brunette smiled back at her, if a bit bashfully for showing up in place of his friend. "True but Heisuke did get pretty beat up. Letting him come in here would be unhealthy for everybody. He's already volunteered to take my spot when he's not so battered."

Chizuru couldn't help but laugh a little at the thought of the teenage captain struggling not to contaminate the food with his bandage bound hands. "I see what you mean. Well get in here and wash both of you. The last thing we all want is our own troops to come marching in here demanding where their food is."

"That would be something, even if it wasn't for something good. This the meat we want to use?" Harada asked as he approached the wooden counter where the large side of beef had been placed for cutting.

"It is, if you'd get that started. Shinpachi-san, if you'd get started on the vegetables while I finish this bread." She said as she expertly flipped the large mound of dough over.

Looking at the heavily powdered dough, the brunette towered over her for a moment as he glanced between her and her task. "What are you doing anyway? Making buns?"

"No, just noodles." She stated simply.

Both men stared, confused. "Noodles?"

Smiling at the pair, Chizuru nodded as she stretched the dough before rolling it. "Uh-huh. Now get started both of you. All of this needs to be ready at the same time for it to come together right."

"You got it." Shinpachi stated, turning away to do what he was told.

Across the room, Harada found a knife, acknowledging her command with a nod. "Right away."

Giving the pair one last look, Chizuru smiled happily before returning to her own work, her small hands working the dough expertly though it'd been a few years since she'd done it. A few more stretching and puffs of flour, the brunette teenager used a clean wooden stick to lift on end up while gently clutching the other as she put the freshly made noodles into the water. She did this several more times, making enough for the whole compound and a bit more for the rare second serving. From the way the two men helping her were practically slobbering told her she'd done her chore right. Knowing how her daifuku had been almost literally devoured earlier that week, Chizuru had a feeling that the men she saw as her friends and protectors would also enjoy her latest feat. Giving everyone equal amounts of broth and noodles, Chizuru sent the food out to all within the compound, even to her brother's room knowing he probably wouldn't eat it. Still it sent thrills through her when the captains let out hums and awes of surprise upon tasting her food, allowing herself a small smirk of satisfaction as it was all but devoured. It was a wonder she got back to the kitchens without more than half the compound begging for second helpings! Her chores took almost an hour to complete, taking mental notes on what to make for dinner later on, moving about with casual efficiency. Save for having to explain just what she'd been keeping from them later that day, Chizuru honestly felt that nothing else could go wrong.

Jin glared at the wall in his slowly boiling anger. They'd been imprisoned for nigh on a week and still they had yet to be released or executed. Every day, the man with raven hair and purple eyes came in, demanding to know who they worked for and why they sought the girl. And every day, he and the others told him nothing. But from the cold rage in the man's eyes, Jin knew he was running out of patience and would likely resort to extreme methods of getting him to talk. Only Jin wasn't planning on talking, he was planning on escaping. Whether the others came or not didn't really matter, only that he got the girl and got away. If one objective could be achieved, then so could the other if not in quick succession. After some hours of talking, the others were already rallying under his leadership so to escape their present situation and maybe salvage their operation. If

possible, even appease whatever rage their master was feeling over their failure and capture if they managed it before dawn. Breaking the lock to the door caging them had taken forever but it was worth it as they swiftly ran as quietly as they could to the nearest doorway in the hopes it was the way out. Seeing a pair of guards in the room beyond stopped them if but for a moment as they rushed the men, taking their spears and swords before anything could be done. Grinning like a demon unleashed from its unearthly prison, Jin didn't hesitate to kill one of the guards with his own sword before looking at his counterparts. "Let's go."

Chizuru had been halfway to her quarters, tired from a long day of work when distant noise brought her mind back to life. Her long month in the Shinsengumi compound had made her familiar with the gait of every man of the military group, and the shuffling steps she heard now only registers as that of strangers. Worse, one of them sounded much like the man who'd been caught following her not a week earlier. That only meant one thing. _They escaped! And my sword is in my office! I could call out but that might make things worseâ€¦I must act if I'm to stop them in their plot._ She pondered what to do as she kept her leisurely pace so not to arouse their suspicion too early. If she could get to her clinic, maybe she could get her sword and fend them off until help arrived. Still she walked casually until she came to a corner than cut off their line of sight on her before she was jogging as quietly as possible as she distantly heard the men curse softly. Already she knew they were rushing to catch up but she didn't risk using her enhancedâ€¦ skills to get away lest someone see her or the men wandered off to cause trouble. Relief still filled her chest when she got enough distance between them to double back to her clinic office where she'd put the short sword after Kaoru's rather disruptive introduction to her protectors. All but straining her ears for her pursuers, Chizuru managed to slip into the small office to find the sword by the desk where she'd left it. Quickly slipping it into her belt, Chizuru made for the door only to hear the men approaching, each of them doing poorly to keep from being detected now that they'd lost track of their quarry. Knowing the door was no longer an option, Chizuru's mind sped up as she tried to think of a way to escape undetected. The ceiling and its distance from the ground was out of the question and would take too long, the floor solidly built and her attempts to break through would be heard. There was no window to crawl out of, just a thick wall separating the different rooms and what the other door did lead to was used for mostly storage or housing a patient.

As their footsteps and voices got closer, Chizuru knew she had to act fast if she hoped to buy time. Picking up one of the lanterns Chizuru plucked out the candle prior to going into the store room for some bandages and a broomstick. Drawing her sword, if but for a moment, she cut the stick in half to wrap the smaller piece up in the bandage. Pausing long enough to hear if the men were closer or not, Chizuru immediately found a match (a Western item she was more than happy to use right about now) and lit the candle. Hiding the candle and its light, she doused the match as she stood in the dark and waited. Her heart pounding in her chest and her ears, Chizuru could hear the men get closer as they burst into each room in search of her. Each time she could tell their frustration was getting to them when they found nothing. Eventually they came to her clinic's door, the shoji kicked down roughly in their irritation, loud shuffling sounding like thunder in her mind as her heart started to race. It was now or never.

Frustrated muttering sounded from the other side of the door and she knew they were going to come in at some point. Not wasting time, Chizuru lit her would-be torch with the candle with one hand while she kept her sword in the other. As the torch began to burn greedily into the bandage's woven fabric, Chizuru blew out the candle and used what little distance that existed in the enclosed space to burst through the shoji. Shouts of surprise met her as some of the men had moved to investigate the odd glow coming from the room only to be taken aback by a small form breaking the door and waving a lit torch into their faces. Blinded and confused, the men shouted and scrambled to get their bearings as Chizuru dashed through the room and out the door. Her feet thudded loudly against the wood beneath her as she ran, already the group of escaped men giving chase as all stealth was abandoned in favor of catching her. Memory served her well in her dash across the mansion and its grounds, passing by the barracks and the kitchens as she headed straight for the captain's quarters. Breath seemed scarce as she ran, all the while shouting for all to hear. "Help! Help! They've escaped! Aid me!"

"Come back here!" she heard one of them snarl from behind her but she didn't stop, her mind's map telling her which way to run, which way to turn. It almost became a blur of wood, stone and shoji panels before she tripped trying to take a turn too fast, making her fall and lose her grip on both her sword and her torch. Mind reeling and pain dulling her senses, she hissed as she tried to get to her feet, loud shouts and clashing swords meeting her ears as she did. Then the sound of rapid footfalls made her look up to see a man in blue come charging at her, stolen sword in one hand as the other was stretched forward to grab her.

"You won't get away this time!" he growled as he came running up, nearly colliding with the young woman as he made to take hold of her arm. Only her returning reflexes helped her avoid his grip as she stumbled away and down into one of the smaller yards. Looking around frantically for something to fight him with, she saw her sword was too far away even if she did make a move for it. Time seemed to slow down as orbs of deep brown fell upon the torch she'd made back in the storeroom almost forever ago, its small flame still burning brightly despite it sitting on exposed earth. Panic and desperation urged her to try for it, though this same mindset stretched her perception of how far away the torch was. Glancing between the man and the torch, Chizuru moved toward it as if in a bid to escape, hoping he wouldn't notice her attempts to reach the object of her focus. Too angry to let his quarry get away, the man in blue was already making his way towards her, his face twisted in a vicious look that scared Chizuru more than the piece of fire she was striving for. Dark memories haunted her in the torch's flame but she had to ignore them if she was going to keep this man from succeeding in his goal. When his hand finally found her arm, it was a shock that she almost froze in place but forced herself to push forward, already pulling against his hold. Daring to look back, his dark eyes were like bottomless pits of anger and ire the like she'd never seen before. If someone was calling her name, it was a distant echo that she couldn't decipher. What happened next became a blur of motion that her mind almost couldn't comprehend it: her grasping hand finally fell on the torch, small fingers wrapping around the wood like a vice as she instinctively brought it up and into the man's face.

The scream that was pulled from his throat as the flames hit his face

and engulfed his vision was enough to chill her to the bone. Surprised by the unnatural sound, Chizuru lost her grip on the torch just as he let go, desperate to get away from the small fire burning his flesh. In consequence, the flames were able to grab onto the edge of his kimono to spread happily across the worn fabric. Arms flailing, sword swinging, voice high in a continuous shriek, the man in blue soon became a human candle as flames burnt cloth, cooked flesh and boiled blood. Too shocked to even cry out for help or try to aid her former attacker, Chizuru forgot about everything else as she backed away from the burning figure as best she could. Somehow, she was on the ground and trembling as her eyes remained transfixed on the sight before her, movement out of the corners of her vision not enough to make her turn away. At some point, Chizuru noticed her sight had become blurry but she didn't care. For all she knew, she'd just killed the man who'd sought to take her to an unknown place for potentially dishonorable reasons. She could hear someone calling to her, calling her name desperately but it didn't register. Whoever it was sounded distant, like a muffled yell that one couldn't quite hear no matter what they did. Then something dark blocked her view of the still flailing man, letting her mind catch up to reality so quickly everything that'd happened overwhelmed her. In seconds, Chizuru fell into a blissful darkness where the man's screaming would never reach her.

"Chizuru-san! Chizuru-san!" Saito called hopelessly at the girl in his arms. Given the way she'd folded over boneless, obviously limp, it was safe to say she'd fainted in shock of the horror before her. _The horror she'd created. For someone so gentle, it must've been too much for her._ He thought sadly as he lay her down onto the soft ground. Behind him, some of the soldiers were already working to put out, or at least silence, Jin as he kept on with his high-pitch wailing as flames kept eating at him. Part of him hated the man for trying to catch Chizuru, forcing her to resort to such a violent means of keeping him at bay. Given how the young woman had reacted was enough to tell any man that it was meant as a distraction and not an attempt to kill. The other half was in agony that such a kind person had been forced to do such a thing. It made him sick, it made him angry. Most of all, it made him confused. As a samurai, his duty was to his lord and to his cause of keeping the people of Kyoto safe. But as a man? As a person? These things were a puzzle to him, his training having kept him ignorant of such things. At least until now. Now he needed such knowledge to handle the woman he found himself paying more attention to than any man should. Thankfully motion and voices behind him became a welcome distraction from his emotional turmoil as Hijikata called out over their men's efforts to douse Jin.

"Get that fire out and secure the compound. And dammit will someone tell me what happened?" Hijikata growled as he stomped into the small yard, glaring at the still flailing man on the ground in disgust. His eyes were hard as stone and his sword was bloody. Given his rage, he probably hadn't noticed.

Having gathered around Chizuru to act guard, Harada was the first to speak. "Exactly what we hoped would not: they broke the lock to their cell and surprised the guards, killed them with their own weapons if the wounds are to go by. Given the path they took through the mansion, I'd say they were looking for Chizuru." Pausing in the middle of his report, Harada looked down at where Saito still knelt over the young woman with concern in his golden eyes. "How is

she?"

"Fainted, likely from that. It was too much for her to handle." Saito remarked in a hollow tone, jewel blue glaring openly at the smoldering pile of burnt flesh and cloth who'd, finally, stopped screaming after being splashed with water. Off to the side, he barely noticed Heisuke picking up her sword and coming over to take the scabbard to sheathe it.

Fury soon vanished from Hijikata's face as pain and regret came over their collective faces. "Gods that's terrible. Get her back to her room and find any more of those mercenaries before the night is through." His anger quickly returned as he moved to leave, all but shouting into the night. "I want to know what the hell is going on."

"Hai taicho." They all stated respectfully at their vice-captain's departure.

Already stepping forward, Shinpachi spoke quietly. "Want one of us to carry her?"

"No, I can do it." Saito managed past his anger, already slipping his arms around the woman's shoulders and knees to lift her up.

"Alright. Just don't blame us when she learns you carried her when you just got permission to train again." The brunette giant teased, though some of his usual mirth was lost to the grim events that'd just plagued them.

Saito didn't answer, instead moving with ease past all the loud shouting, running men and calming chaos knowing the youngest captain was behind him. Very few glanced their way as they trekked across the mansion and its grounds to the young woman's quarters, Heisuke scurrying ahead to get the door open for them as he moved to light one of the lanterns within. Not acknowledging his companion, Saito mechanically walked into the room to kneel at the bed mat on the floor as he gently set her down. As Heisuke moved about, Saito was pulling the sheets from under her so to cover her unconscious form with them. Assured that she was comfortable, rather than standing, Saito sat down on the floor. By now, Heisuke had approached with a bowl of water and a cloth in hand about to kneel beside Chizuru to wipe her face of her now dry tears. Saito's grip on his hand stopped him, making him blink at the older man. Confused, the teenager stared. "Saito-san?"

When he spoke, Saito felt a rush of surprise at how dead his voice sounded to his ears as the words came forth. "I'll do it. Go and make sure there are guards outside in case any of the escaped prisoners come here."

"But-." Heisuke began to say.

This time Saito brought his gaze up to meet the boy's, putting more force in his tone than necessary. "Go."

Heisuke stared but eventually backed down, knowing better than to argue against his superior. "Okay. I'll be back." The teen promised as he let Saito take the bowl and cloth prior to quickly

leaving.

But Saito didn't hear any of it. All he could focus on was the young woman before him and how distressed she looked even in sleep. Her expression only angered and pained him even more than he thought possible but he kept it contained lest it somehow burst through his stoic exterior. He wasn't sure how he'd explain to the guards who would soon be outside, or to a startled Chizuru, why one such as him was acting so irrationally. Willing his hand to be steady in its movements, Saito dipped the cloth in the water, squeezing out the excess before gently wiping away the girl's face of her tears. It took him a few minutes but he moved on to her hands which were also dirty from scrambling in the dirt. Drying her face and hands with the dry part of the cloth, Saito put both bowl and cloth away before reclaiming his spot by her bed. With only the one lantern filling the room with light, Saito didn't notice, much less care. Nothing short of death or fire was going to make him move—even if he stayed there the rest of the night.

It's been so long since I posted and it's not as long as the others so please forgive me! My brain likes to use its impulsive, creative mojo against me. Either way, I hope everybody will like what's already posted so I can work on what's next:

Chapter 6: Honesty

Kazama's mercenaries have failed once again but more are on the way. With the arrival of Kaoru things are already starting to shift for Chizuru and her protectors. But is it enough to lead to them parting ways or rallying against an uncertain future? See how it all unfolds in:

Chapter 6: Honesty!****

End
file.